GASTON
OLAF
HENRY OYEN

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GASTON OLAF

HENRY OYEN

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BY

HENRY OYEN

AUTHOR OF
THE SNOW-BURNER, Etc.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Gaston Olaf Comes to Havens Falls	9
II.	A Challenge	15
III.	The Girl with the Brown Eyes	23
IV.	The Taming of Red Shirt	28
V.	Devil Dave Taggart	35
VI.	Brown Eyes Can Be Cold	44
VII.	A Man's Size Job	50
VIII.	A Crooked Trail	56
IX.	"Not A White Man's Outfit"	66
X.	Devil Dave at Play	73
XI.	Gaston Begins to Think	80
XII.	Taggart's Man No Longer	86
XIII.	The Crook Trail Exposed	91
XIV.	Taggart's System	97
XV.	Gaston Has A Scheme	104
XVI.	Tom Pine is Puzzled	109
XVII.	"For Rose Havens"	115
XVIII.	The Spring Break-Up	120
XIX.	The Trap	127
XX.	How Taggart Lost the Drive	132
XXI.	"You Can't Live Here After This"	140
XXII.	Twenty-Five Thousand—Cash	149
XXIII.	The Money Saved	156
XXIV.	A Fresh Start	162
XXV.	Gaston's Dream	168
XXVI.	The First Marshal of Havens Falls	176

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXVII.	TAGGART'S CHANCE	183
XXVIII.	SATURDAY NIGHT	189
XXIX.	A FIGHT	197
XXX.	THE COMING OF LAW AND ORDER	206
XXXI.	TAGGART'S DEFIANCE	211
XXXII.	THE POWER OF WOMAN	216
XXXIII.	BATTLE	224
XXXIV.	GASTON BUYS STORE CLOTHES	232
XXXV.	A QUIET SUNDAY	238
XXXVI.	SETTLING DOWN	243
XXXVII.	A STORM BREWING	247
XXXVIII.	"WAIT, GASTON!"	256
XXXIX.	TAGGART STRIKES	264
XL.	THE END OF DEVIL DAVE	272
XLI.	DAYS OF QUIET	281
XLII.	"THE TRAIL, THE TRAIL!"	288

GASTON OLAF

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CHAPTER I

GASTON OLAF COMES TO HAVENS FALLS

GASTON OLAF FRANCOIS THORSON, to give him at once his full, complicated name, raced with easy strides of his long skis to the crest of the ridge and stood for a moment against the sky-line, looking down upon the new woods settlement known as Havens Falls.

From the tips of his rubber-shod feet, resting lightly on his skis, to the short bronze curls which flamed beneath his muskrat cap, the six-foot-two of Gaston Olaf was alive to the point of bursting. Though the late Winter morning was raw and cold, he wore no mackinaw. His blue-flannel shirt, stretching taut across the swell of his chest, was open wide at the top. Cloth and buttons were not made to confine the brown, corded neck that rose like a column above it.

Around his waist was wound a silken sash of brightest red; his trousers were of softest buckskin, fringed Indian fashion. But it was the size, the build and the reckless bearing of him that would attract attention. Standing with lifted chin there on top of the ridge, with the wind whistling shrilly past him, he was blood-brother to the rough outdoors about him, as big, as free, ay, and as lawless. His grace and elegance of form, so rare in a big man, Gaston had from his

French mother, and his huge-boned viking's body had come to him from a giant Norse sire. Withal he was an American, born and reared, and some of his reputation for lawlessness had been made at the expense of men who questioned his nationality.

It was his first sight of Havens Falls. As he leaned forward against the ski-straps, peering down at the single street of the settlement, his bright blue eyes snapped with excitement and a boyish grin of reckless anticipation creased his young, bronzed face.

"There she is, Tom Pine! There's our town!" he cried. "Stores, sidewalks, houses, and men and—women!"

To the world in general, and to the little clump of buildings below in particular, he threw a careless kiss.

"Men and women, Tom Pine. Strong men to fight with; pretty women to laugh with. What more can a man ask Life to give him?"

Tom Pine, grizzled of hair, short of stature, but uncannily broad of shoulder and long of arm, drew himself up beside his young partner, carefully belting his mackinaw against the morning wind. In years it was obvious that Tom Pine was twice the age of Gaston, but the twinkle in his bright, outdoor eyes told that at heart he was just as young.

The settlement lay at their feet in its snug site on a bend in the La Croix River. From where they stood they could look down upon each building in the place and tell by its appearance for what each one stood. Most of the buildings were gathered together at the foot of the ridge, directly below where they stood. There stood the post-office, the hotel, stores and dwelling-houses. Farther down there was a gap on the street, and at its lower end, running down to the river front, the street was builded solid on both sides; each building obviously was a saloon—or worse. Havens

Falls was new, but already it had established standards, distinctions.

"Yep—a town," agreed Tom Pine curtly. "See how they keep the black sheep and the white separate. That's towns; that's civilisation. I don't like towns, Gaston Olaf. I don't feel safe in 'em. In towns you got to sleep in rooms, with four walls around you, and a roof close above you to shut out the sky. People settle down in towns. Gaston Olaf, I'm always afraid that you'n me'll go to a town some time and—settle down!"

Gaston's laugh, a rollicking, hair-trigger laugh, rang out over the bare ridge.

"Towns are good places to come to once in a while, Tom Pine," said he. "Have we ever stayed in a town long enough to hurt us?"

"Not yet. I admit you that, Gaston Olaf. And I ain't saying towns ain't got their uses, to have a time in, and buy chuck and cartridges in. And I ain't saying we wasn't due for a little trip after being in camp six solid months to prove up those timber claims, which is too long for any man living to stay in one spot. But"—he shook his head slowly—"I don't like the feel of this trip for sour apples. I got an Indian feeling, Gaston Olaf. I'm afraid something's going to happen here."

Gaston Olaf, as Tom Pine addressed him, looked reproachfully at his companion.

"Tom Pine, how long have we been partners?" he demanded.

"Years," Tom nodded. "Go on; I'm listening."

"And did you ever know me to go to a town without making something happen?"

"Oh, that. Of course. Man's got to kick up his hind heels a little when he hits a town. But this—this ain't that, Gaston Olaf; no, it ain't."

"Not that? Hah! I've got it, Tom Pine. It's because of the word this man Taggart sent us—word there was good money here for us any time we wanted to work. And you're afraid we'll take a job."

"No. 'Tain't that, either. I ain't scared of work, once in a while; you know that, Gaston Olaf. This—this is a reg'lar old Indian feeling, Gaston Olaf. I got a feeling that something different is going to happen here: I don't know what, but—something different."

"'Something different'!" Gaston had settled his feet into the straps for the run down the hill. "Let's hope so, Tom Pine. Let's hope and pray you're a good prophet. That's what we're looking for—something different. That's what makes life worth living. So come on; let's see—Hello!"

From the lower end of the street came floating up to them the echoes of a drunken roar. Half a dozen men had come tumbling out of one of the saloons, laughing, singing, cursing, hallooing wildly. Locking arms they came surging up the street, announcing loudly that they were bad men, and spread themselves in a rude semi-circle before the door of the post-office, directly below where Gaston and Tom Pine stood.

Gaston's smile of anticipation grew broader, his eyes brighter.

"Strong men to fight with, Tom Pine," he said with a wink.

"Yes; and pretty women to—look at the pups!"

Out of the post-office came a woman. Even from the top of the ridge Gaston could see that she was small, that she was young and trig and neat, and that she tripped lightly down the snow-covered steps on tiny feet.

Many things happened in the next few seconds. The girl turned to go her way, and five of the men, holding hands, barred her progress. The sixth, a big man in

a flaming red shirt, stepped forward and attempted to take the girl by the arm.

Other things happened instantly upon this. As the girl shrank back a smallish, stockily built man ran bareheaded out of a store across the street, fought his way through the crowd and hurled himself upon the girl's tormentor. The man in the red shirt gave a bellow of rage as the small man staggered him with a blow on the jaw. For a moment, so determined was he, it seemed that the newcomer would triumph. Then the gang bore him down. From the hotel now came flying the splendid figure of a young girl, whose size and blondness shouted her Scandinavian breed even from afar.

The big man had slipped an arm about his victim. The crack of the blond Amazon's hand on his cheek caused him to relinquish his hold with one hand and knock her into the street. Then he laughed and drew the small girl toward him. But Fate, busy, inevitable Fate, was sending intervention on wings of speed.

Gaston Olaf was half-way down the ridge. Never did Gaston fail in the spectacular. He had started the moment the big man caught the girl by the arm. The snow on the ridge was frozen and he came at express-train speed, silently, unsuspected by those below.

Deliberately he steered his course for a boulder near the foot of the hill. Using the boulder as a take-off, he leaped. Upward and outward he flew through the air, standing up taut and straight, arms stretched above his head, the air-splitting ski-jumper at his best.

His leap was well-timed. He landed squarely on the big man as he bent over to kiss the struggling girl and flattened him into the snow beneath his skis.

"One down!" sang Gaston.

His terrific momentum hurtled him on, head over heels, through the air, straight into the midst of the

five men who had the small man down. Before they could move he struck them, a two-hundred-and-twenty-pound bullet of bone and gristle, flying at the rate of thirty miles an hour.

One instant the five were on their victim, like bears upon a fallen wildcat. The next the group of them had split, as if from an explosion, into five separate and distinct parts, each part flying energetically, but helpless in its own distinct and separate direction.

"Gangway, please, gangway!"

Tom Pine, coursing neatly in Gaston's tracks, found it inconvenient to check himself until he had taken a jump off the red-shirted man's prostrate form, and landed full weight on a pair of the men whom Gaston had knocked into the street.

Gaston and Tom Pine, snow-covered and torn, the skis broken to stumps on their feet, brought up sitting, side by side, in the snow. Solemnly they reached out; solemnly they shook hands.

"Tom Pine, my chapeau is off to you," said Gaston. "You are big medicine as a prophet. 'Something different,' you said. 'Something different' was right. Never—never have we hit a town in this fashion!"

But Tom Pine shook his head, mournfully studying the wrecks of his skis.

"I'm worried some more, Gaston Olaf," said he. "I believe in signs and, you see, we—broke our skis!"

CHAPTER II

A CHALLENGE

GASTON OLAF sprang to his feet with a laugh, kicking his feet loose from the useless stumps. He was happy; for the spectacular and dramatic were dear to the French half of his nature.

The little man who had come so gallantly and futilely to the girl's rescue lay still in the snow, with his left arm bent back in unpleasant fashion. Gaston gave him scarcely a glance. What was a man more or less! Men were plentiful. Men lying still after a fight were no novelty to Gaston. Smallish, bareheaded men—men who lived in towns and ran stores—must expect to get knocked out if they tried to interfere with boys when they were having their fun. But a woman, a young woman, and trig and neat, who tripped lightly on tiny feet, in distress!

Gaston swung around upon her, his most winning smile upon his lips, his lightest words upon the tip of his tongue. And as he faced her a sudden change came upon him.

The words did not come. The smile lost much of its assurance.

Gaston stood stock-still and stared. He removed his cap and bowed with the grace that he had from his French mother. But the words, the light, pleasant words, which hitherto always had risen to his tongue like a golden stream under the inspiration of a woman's eyes, were not forthcoming.

The girl was small, as he had judged from the top

of the hill. To Gaston she seemed wonderfully small and delicate in those rough surroundings. Above her close-buttoned mackinaw her face seemed to Gaston to rise like a frail lily. She was deadly pale, and her wide-set eyes were filled with terror. Brown eyes they were, wonderful brown eyes. But at each side of her cheeks a tiny ridge of muscle showed how firmly set was her jaw, while her mouth was pursed in a firm line of determination. And, what made Gaston tongue-tied, she was not looking at him.

"Oh, you cowards!" she cried, and the five men, rising drunkenly to their feet out in the street, cowered under the lash of womanly scorn and anger in her voice. "You miserable specimens of manhood! Call yourselves men! Five of you on one man, and you struck him when he was down!"

The men in the street looked guiltily at the still figure in the snow and began to slink away.

"Yes, see what you've done now!" cried the girl. "Isn't it a fine, brave thing to have done! Brave, strong men! Aren't you proud of your work! I should think you would hang your heads in shame. Oh, you cowardly brutes! You may have killed him."

A laugh, bull-throated and unabashed, sounded behind her. The man on whom Gaston had jumped was on his feet, miraculously unhurt. He was a big man, tall and broad, but flabby and gross from dissipation.

"Fun, little girl, just fun!" he laughed. "Nobody killed; just put out of business for a minute, sweetheart. Boys will be boys. Now we're going to have out li'l kiss, and then the big bum who jumped me——"

"Yes?" said Gaston Olaf.

The big man stopped. Gaston Olaf was standing before him, his hands resting carelessly on his hips, his head thrown back, lips smiling, eyes happy. Gaston

ever insisted that he was not an especially courageous man, for, as he explained, when a fight was in prospect, the Berserk strain that he had from his Norse father always asserted itself, and a glow of contentment spread over him, while strange, cheerful music hummed in his ears.

Red Shirt's face was convulsed with the sudden, unreasoning rage of the powerful brute, crossed and defied, and mad with the desire to destroy.

"You—you——"

His teeth gritted furiously as he lowered his bull-like head for the rush.

"My name," laughed Gaston happily, "is Gaston Olaf François Thorson. But I'm American; don't you forget that. I jumped on you. I rubbed your nose in the dirt. I am a better man than you are. You are a big bum! You are—" he searched his fairly full vocabulary for the phrase most hated along the river—"you are a high-banker and afraid of white water."

Red Shirt looked at him. The rush did not materialise. Gaston Olaf merely stood as he was, his hands on his hips, his lips smiling. But Red Shirt looked above and saw his eyes.

"You are going away from here in about two seconds," continued Gaston pleasantly. "You are going to take your ugly mug out of this young lady's sight. If you were fit to speak to her I would make you apologise. Now—get ready to hike!"

Red Shirt looked around. Men were coming out of near-by buildings. In the door of the post-office stood an old man, the postmaster, in G. A. R. blue, with a shotgun in his trembling hands. Red Shirt's lip lifted in a sneer.

"You're safe here, Mr. Gasbag Thorson," he growled. "I've heard of you. You play at being a

bad man. But you wouldn't dast try this down at the other end of the street."

The devil flamed up in Gaston. Many men had played with his odd name. Few but had regretted it. Tom Pine saw by the play of cords in his neck how Gaston was holding himself in.

"Perhaps not," he said quietly enough. "Perhaps I would not dare to try it down there. But in case I do, who should I ask for, please?"

A grin of contempt split the other's evil face.

"My name is 'Red Shirt' Murphy," he snarled as he turned away. "Ask anybody in Jack MacCarthy's where I hang out."

"Thank you, Mr. Red Shirt Murphy. We shall see. And now—travel!"

Gaston Olaf bowed mockingly as Red Shirt slouched away, and swung around again to speak to the girl. As a matter of course he knew that he had performed a gallant and striking action; that for the time being he was a heroic figure. He had played the rôle of Boss Man often in his varied career, and he knew full well the light in woman's eyes that is the hero's due. Therefore he was shocked when he turned around and found himself still apparently forgotten.

The girl was down on her knees in the snow beside the man in the street. She had lifted his head and was holding it up in the hollow of her arm, while with a tiny handkerchief she wiped the blood from the cruelly beaten face.

The terror of the moment before, when she had escaped from the brutal Murphy, the relief that had come with Gaston's arrival, the rage that had pinched her mouth as she scolded, all were wiped clean from her face, leaving no trace. In their place had come a look of tenderness, alarm, solicitude, and at the sight of it Gaston Olaf thrilled in a manner that had never

come to him in a life full of thrills. This was something new, and he suddenly hungered for something—he knew not what—which his hard life had denied him. Jealousy shot instinctively into his soul as he looked down at her, the instinctive jealousy of the strong male beholding feminine tenderness lavished on another man. And instinctively he fought it back in shame, as a feeling too small, too unsportsmanlike to have room in his nature. Nevertheless, the feeling had been there and it left its mark.

"Oh, the brutes, the brutes! I believe they've killed him!" the girl was sobbing. "Mr. Hale, Dick! He doesn't move. Oh, Hulda, Hulda! Run and tell your mother—quick! She'll know what to do. And somebody get Dr. Sanders."

The yellow-haired Amazon had risen from the snow and stood, arms akimbo, looking down at girl and man, undisturbed, unhurried by the scene.

"No; he en't dead, Miss Havens," she said quietly. "He err yoost knock' out. I seen lots o' dem fool man like dat. Dey're alvays fighting, deh big fools. Here come my mooder now. I go tell deh doctor."

Out of the hotel whence Hulda had come—a frame building bearing a sign "Olson's Hotel"—came waddling a smiling old woman as broad as Hulda was tall, as white of hair as Hulda was yellow.

"Good heavens! It's Mester Hale!" she cried as she bustled up. "And you, Miss Havens! You shouldn't do dat. You got blood on your vaist, and you catch cold on your lags if you don't gat up right dis minute. Hare, you big man." She nodded to Gaston as if he were only a big boy. "And you, liddle man." She indicated Tom Pine. "Vat you standing dare for? You pick him up and carry him in. We tak' care of him, Miss Havens. I tenk his arm err brok', oll right."

As she talked she drew the girl up from the snow

and waved a commanding hand to Gaston and Tom Pine. Gaston pushed Tom away and, stooping low, thrust his long arms through the snow beneath the prostrate form. Then he stood up, bearing the weight of the sturdily built man on his arms, as a woman might bear a child.

"Where to, mother?" he said. "You're the Boss Man around here. Why didn't you come out in the first place? One look at that gang and you'd saved this lad rough handling."

Mrs. Olson's broad face grew broader still in a grin of delight; but Gaston saw that the girl whom the women called Miss Havens only held up the little man's broken arm.

"Yass, yass. It's good to have strong men around some time," said Mrs. Olson. "Come now; follow me."

She led the way into the hotel, to a comfortably fitted room on the second floor. The movement hastened Hale's returning consciousness and as Gaston moved toward the bed he opened his eyes. No groan came from his lips, though the broken bones in his arm grated as they laid him down. He looked quietly around, noted that Miss Havens stood unharmed in the doorway, tried to move his arm, and couldn't, then tightly pressed his lips together and lay without a word staring up at the ceiling, a world of patience in his genial, rounded face, waiting for the doctor.

The doctor arrived immediately, taking the stairs two at a time.

"What ho, Dick Hale! What 'a' they been doing to you, young fellow?" he shouted as he came bustling in, a thin, spectacled, Vandyke-bearded man with a wildly coloured waistcoat and a merry twinkle in his eye. His eyes fell upon Gaston. "What ho! You're the Flying Man, eh? Dropped from the skies on top

of Red Shirt Murphy. Heard about it. Given a night's sleep to have seen it. Something new, absolutely."

He was throwing off gloves, cap and overcoat.

"Rough-handled you, eh, old dog?" he continued, taking up Hale's arm. "Hm, good enough. Simple fracture. Have you hale, Hale, in a hurry. Mrs. Olson, get some whisky. No, stop; I forgot. Hale doesn't use the vile stuff. I'll give him something else. But you can get me some nice, clean bandages, Mrs. Olson. Hulda—magnificent white and gold Norse Valkyrie that you are—you run downstairs and get hot water. Miss Havens, I believe I'd step out of the room for a few minutes. Hm. Put your big arm under his back there, Mister. That's right. Now you can go, too, Big Man; too big for a sick-room. See you later, I hope. Like to talk to you. S'long."

"Hold on," groaned Hale suddenly, as Gaston moved away. "Come to my dance to-night. Store across street. My arm—be a man short. Take my place. Coming?"

"Sure," replied Gaston.

Tom Pine was waiting anxiously as Gaston stepped out of the hotel.

"Gaston—Gaston Olaf," he said tremulously, "let's travel. The signs are getting thicker. There you was, Gaston Olaf, doing woman's work with a woman to boss you. 'Pick him up,' sez the woman, and you picked him up. 'Carry him in,' she sez, and you carried. Tamed like, just like men who live in towns have got to do—a woman to boss you! Gaston—Gaston Olaf, let's hit the trail."

Gaston shook his head. He did not laugh; a bad sign. Tom Pine looked wistfully back toward the free, unhoused wilderness whence they had come.

"Gaston Olaf—look at her!" He waved his hand

toward the forest that ringed the town around. "That's the place for us, boy. No women out there. Look! We can hit that trail that runs 'round the shoulder of the hog-back yonder. Once we're t'other side of the hill, we're shet of this town; we can streak it for the bush; we're safe. Come on, Gaston Olaf. I had the Indian feeling about this place when we started for it, and what's happened since we been here, has made me see that the signs read true. Let's sneak, Gaston Olaf; let's sneak before it's too late."

Gaston shook his head, smiling tolerantly.

"What about this Red Shirt man?" he asked.

Tom Pine nodded regretfully.

"That's so. We ought to clean him up before we go. Sure."

"What about this Taggart man who wants to see us?"

"Well, let's see him and get it over with."

"And—and——"

Gaston stopped abruptly and whirled around at the sound of a light footfall behind him.

Tom Pine groaned.

"Too late!" he murmured under his breath.

Miss Havens had come out of the hotel and was holding her hand out to Gaston Olaf.

CHAPTER III

THE GIRL WITH THE BROWN EYES

"I DON'T want you to think because I'm tardy in saying 'thanks' that I'm not grateful to you, Mr. Thorson," she said. "I was so concerned about poor Mr. Hale that I forgot everything else. I appreciate very much what you did."

She halted. For the first time she was looking at him comprehensively, and few women could look upon Gaston Olaf as he stood then, a master woodsman, hardened and tough, yet with something winningly boylike about him, without pausing in appreciation. And Miss Havens, from the crown of dark hair on her head to her tiny feet, was as much a woman as Gaston was a man.

Gaston took the proffered hand timidly. It lay for a second, small and white, in his huge bronze paw, he scarcely daring to touch it for fear of crushing it. Then it was gone, but the touch of it remained for long after.

For a moment they stood silent, a study in contrasts, the man, as hard and rugged as any pine in the forest, the girl delicately feminine, a creature of softness, tenderness. And the morning sun flickered in their eyes, and they were young.

"I want to thank you for what you did," she concluded a little lamely. "I—I feel under obligation to you."

Gaston Olaf's tongue loosened. His gay, boyish laughter rang promptly upon her words.

"You feel under obligation to me, Miss Havens? No, no, no! The truth must out. I'm the one who is under obligation to you. You do not understand how that is? I will explain. My partner, Tom Pine —the small, tough-looking man there—and myself have been in the bush for six solid months. Six months, Miss Havens, one hundred and eighty days! Not in a camp where there are other men, where things may happen. No; we have been alone, by ourselves, in our two little cabins on a couple of timber claims we are proving up over on Otter Creek. There we have stayed, six months, with the trees for company by day, the wolves, stars, bobcats, by night. Good enough company, too, Miss Havens, for six months. But no longer.

"Six months is the limit. Then a man begins to yearn for his own. He wants to see other men, talk to them—see women, if he is lucky. Tom Pine and I come to Havens Falls. We want to see other people. We need to have something happen or we'll bust. We stand up there on the ridge and look down. We wonder if anything will happen in Havens Falls. Does it?

"Miss Havens, as we're standing up there, those boys begin to get impolite to you. What more could we wish? Tom Pine and I, we slide down and bump right into excitement—fine, juicy excitement—and now—now I have the privilege of meeting and talking with you. 'Obligations!' Miss Havens, I must thank you for the treat that you have given a poor, lonely man from the woods."

He laughed as he completed his swiftly uttered speech, and the infectious gaiety and youth of his merriment caught her up and she laughed with him.

"You look at it in a strange way," she said. "I never fancied any one would take that point of view."

"Exactly. There is a difference in our points of

view. You live in town; I live in the woods. Men get queer ideas in the woods. For instance, they think that towns are good places to avoid, except when in need of provisions."

"That's right," interrupted Tom Pine. "They are!"

Again Gaston laughed and again the girl joined in.

"You see, Miss Havens? Tom Pine there is a regular old wood-tick. He's actually afraid when he is in town, afraid something terrible will happen."

"That's right." Tom Pine's voice was grimmer than ever. "Towns is where they does happen."

"For instance, when we came here he was afraid that the worst thing in the world would happen to us."

"In Havens Falls?" she said. "Well, it *is* getting to be a very rough town."

"Oh, no, no, no, Miss Havens! It wasn't anything like that that Tom Pine was afraid of."

"What was it, then?"

"Guess."

"No. I'd never guess. I'm afraid our points of view are too different."

Gaston's face grew deep with mock gravity.

"He was afraid," he said slowly, solemnly, "he was afraid that we might settle down here and *stay!*"

Her laughter, to Gaston, rang out like the tinkling of a fine silver bell.

"Oh dear! As terrible as that? And you—do you share Mr. Pine's fears?"

Gaston did not reply at once. He looked around him at the squat houses, the frame stores, the sidewalks, at the river and the timber beyond, and his eyes came back to the girl's.

"I am a roamer, Miss Havens," said he. "I've got the restless feet that won't let a man stop long enough in any one place to get rooted. I've never stayed in any town I've been in any longer than I could help."

Again he looked around. "But this—seems to be different," he said. "I suppose a man has to settle down sometime. Maybe—I don't know—maybe Tom Pine is right."

With a laugh he pointed out into the street where the broken stumps of his skis were sticking in the snow.

"You see, Miss Havens, I broke my skis here."

"But I suppose you can make new ones?" she said.

"You bet!" snapped Tom Pine. "I'm the best ski-maker in this country."

"A man can make skis, or do anything else, if he really wants to," said Gaston.

"Can he?" she said, with a glance at the lower end of the street. "Then I wish I were a man. I'd make Havens Falls fit for decent people to live in."

She began to move away toward a substantial frame house in a fenced yard beyond the post-office.

"There is poor Mr. Hale," she said, pausing. "He's just completed his store building and is to give a dance this evening to celebrate it, and here they disable him."

"Boys will be boys, Miss Havens. Especially in a settlement that's still got the bark on."

"Of course. But it isn't necessary for them to be such utter brutes as this last gang of outsiders has shown themselves to be."

"Oh." Gaston's eyes widened. "Outsiders, are they? And there's going to be a dance in the new store to-night? Oh, ho! Miss Havens, are you going to grace the gay and festive occasion with your presence?"

"I am going to be there, yes," she laughed. Then over her shoulder she asked, "Why?"

"Because," said Gaston seriously, "that being the

case I have got to get a shave, and a boiled shirt, and some new shoes, and—dress up."

"You're coming, too?"

"Hale just invited me. I am."

She paused a distance away and looked at him.

"You might," she said merrily, "get a shave, but please—please don't dress up!"

Gaston scratched his chin dubiously as he watched her go.

"What did she mean by that, d'you s'pose, Tom?"

But Tom Pine deigned not to reply; only spat disgustedly into the snow.

"Now you've done it, Gaston Olaf," he grumbled. "You always was a fool for hunting trouble."

CHAPTER IV

THE TAMING OF RED SHIRT

WHAT ho, gents! Looking over our fair young village?" The irrepressible doctor was beaming on them from the doorway of the hotel. "Take a good look at her. You see before you the peerless Queen City of the great North Woods—in embryo. Small and sordid to look upon now, gents, but, I pray you, let your imagination soar. See, instead of the crude board and log shanties, a street of brick and stone. See, instead of saloons, honky-tonks and gambling-houses—schools, churches, banks, and—millinery shops. Instead of a couple of hundred inhabitants, see thousands; instead of—hm, hm! Rather hard on the imagination, seeing so much on a dry stomach. If you'll step across the street to my palatial office I'll hurl a shot of hooch into you that I'll guarantee won't give you the snakes under twenty drinks. Come along. I pine for your ruffianly company."

He led the way to a two-room frame building opposite. The first room was fitted out as a doctor's office, cleanly, pleasant, severe; but the room behind, whither he ushered Gaston and Tom Pine, betrayed the doctor's true character.

A bow-legged bulldog leaped truculently from a cot-bed to welcome them. In reprimand the doctor picked up a boxing-glove from a chair and smote the dog across the nose. The walls of the room were hung with guns, fishing-rods, boxing pictures, deer-heads and mounted fish. Books lay scattered about pro-

miscuously, and the reek of tobacco smoke hung thick over all.

"Now then, Big Fellow," said the doctor briskly, when the drinks had been poured and consumed, "do you do those long-distance jumps onto a bad man's head as a regular thing, or was this merely a special occasion? Sing me the saga of what happened out there in front of the post-office. I try not to miss anything as good as that, but Fate was ag'in' me this time. I didn't see a thing."

"No," said Gaston, "you will answer my questions first: Who is the young lady, Miss Havens?"

The doctor bowed.

"'Young lady' is right. Miss Havens is—you've heard of old 'Lone Camp' Havens? Yep? He was the old-timer who cruised this country first of all. Made this settlement. Tried to get hold of the timber around. Did get hold of some. LaCroix Logging Company froze him out of most of it. When he died he left a few houses, a few acres of town-site along the river here, and one good bunch of white pine up the river, ten, twelve miles away, on Loon Lake. Well, Miss Havens is the old man's daughter. Away at school when the old gent died. Came back. Settled down. LaCroix Company tried to buy her out for about four cents on the dollar's worth. She wouldn't sell. There you are. Angel of the settlement; you know what I mean."

Gaston nodded.

"Do you know of a man named Taggart?"

"LaCroix Logging Company—that's Taggart—'Devil Dave' Taggart. Office down by his mill on the river."

"And Red Shirt Murphy?"

The doctor spat.

"That big bum! Jail-rat, I should judge. Came up

with a gang about a week ago. Going to a new camp up the river. All outsiders. All got on a drunk. Been ripping the shirt off the back of the town ever since they've been here. Made a bet he'd kiss Miss Havens before he left town. Bah!"

Gaston was on his feet.

"Where's Jack MacCarthy's place?" he asked quietly.

The doctor rose also.

"Down the street; the biggest place here," he said, puzzled. "That's where Murphy hangs out."

"So long," said Gaston as he started out.

"Oh, no," said the doctor. "I'm coming, too."

With a song on his lips Gaston hurried down the street to the long frame building bearing the sign: "Jack MacCarthy's Saloon." Still humming, he entered the barroom, which was well filled. He walked straight up to the bar and threw up a dollar.

"A drink of liquor," he said loudly, "and be sure it isn't out of the bottle that you give that high-banker, Mr. Red Shirt Murphy."

For a space of seconds the room was still. Then from the end of the bar came a throaty bellow.

"You come for it, did you, Mr. Gasbag Thorson?" growled Murphy, as he stepped forth from his crowd and threw off his mackinaw. "All right; you're going to get what you come after."

Gaston turned, a glassful of fiery liquor in his hand.

"Why, there's the high-banker now," he laughed. "Here, Mr. Murphy, have a drink," and he hurled the liquor straight into Murphy's lowering face.

Turmoil broke loose. Half a dozen men leaped toward him.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" Dr. Sander's bantering

voice rose above the noise. "Fair play, fair play! We do not conduct affairs between gentlemen in this manner." He advanced from the doorway to the centre of the room. "The difficulty lies between these two gentlemen; nobody else has any share in it. Mr. MacCarthy, I hope you agree?"

Behind the bar the puff-faced MacCarthy looked Gaston over and nodded.

"The doc's right. It's the two av 'em for it. Clear the floor, the rest of you there! Give 'em all the room they want."

"I thank you, Mr. MacCarthy." The doctor bowed lightly and produced a split-second watch. "The fight will be conducted regularly, three-minute rounds, one-minute intervals. Anything goes but knives, axes, guns, and other ungentlemanly impedimenta. Gentlemen, are you ready?"

"Ready!" laughed Gaston; he was leaning carelessly with his back against the bar.

"Ready!" growled Murphy.

"Time!" cried the doctor, and with the word Murphy rushed.

Gaston did not move until Murphy was within striking distance; then only the leap of the wildcat would have matched him for swiftness, the might of a bear for power.

He caught Murphy about the middle. In a fury he heaved him up over his head and let him fall. Then he stepped back to the bar.

Murphy strove to arise. A groan escaped his lips and he collapsed. The doctor stepped forward and bent over him. A moment later he looked up.

"The fight is over, gentlemen, and Mr. Thorson wins," he said. "Some of you fellows who're friends of Murphy pick him up. We've got to put him to bed; his collar-bone's broken."

"The right one, isn't it, doc?" asked Gaston.

"Yes. Snapped clean."

Gaston looked around at the hard eyes that were regarding him truculently.

"It was his right arm that Murphy put around Miss Havens," he said. "Anybody else want to give me a chance to show that trick?"

Even the doctor stared.

"Hm, hm! I see. Pretty rough work, Big Man. Little disappointed myself. Hoped we'd see a nice little mill with the maulies. Like to have you show me that throw, though, later on."

"I will show it now if any of Mr. Murphy's friends want revenge," said Gaston. "What! Nobody? All right; think it over. Any time any of you change your minds you can find me. I will always be ready to oblige."

With Tom Pine following, he walked out, paying no more attention to the glowering crowd than if it was so much furniture.

"Cripes, Gaston Olaf!" gasped Tom Pine when they were out in the street. "That was the fiercest I ever see you tackle a man yet. I never see you mad yet—don't know if you really can get mad like other folks—but if I didn't know you so well, I'd say you was mad when you took hold of him."

Gaston shook his head seriously.

"Tom Pine," said he, "I sort of take to this settlement. I like the people here. I like the way things happen. We've had excitement. 'Something different.' Life has been worth living every second since we came into town. I don't know but what we'll make camp and stay awhile."

"That ain't news to me, Gaston Olaf. I knowed we was going to do that for some time."

"Well, Tom Pine, I'm a peace-loving man."

Tom Pine made queer noises in his throat, indicating that he was suppressing a chuckle.

"I am," insisted Gaston. "I don't like to keep fighting all the time."

"Not all the time; I admit you that, Gaston Olaf. Unless a man thinks out loud that he's as good a man as you are, you don't want to fight him; I'll admit you that."

"There's a whole lot of hard men in this settlement; you can see that," continued Gaston. "Well, I don't want to be fighting 'em all. And I don't think after this I'll have to, eh, Tom Pine?"

"Perhaps." Tom Pine looked at his partner out of the corner of one eye. "And was that why you was so rough with this Murphy—was that the whole reason why?"

Gaston looked dreamily up the street.

"He was like a baby in my hands, wasn't he, Tom Pine?" he said vaguely. "Just like a little toy. I felt as if I exploded when I laid hands on him. His arm curved out to get me, and I saw him just as we saw him first when he was trying to take hold of the girl, back there at the foot of the hill. I heaved up on him. Tom Pine, I swear I didn't feel his weight at all. He was nothing. I let him fall. His neck or his shoulder blade, I didn't care. The dirty, drunken bum! He dared to try to kiss that girl!"

"He'll have it in for you," said Tom drily. "The others may be scared off; he'll remember. He's kind of a hard one. You can see it in his eye."

Gaston came out of his mood of abstraction with a start.

"What? Oh, yes, sure. But he won't be fit for rough work for some time. Now, let's look up this Taggart."

As they looked around, a soft-footed young Indian

came like a shadow out of MacCarthy's place, slipped past them and glided away toward the mill buildings on the water-front.

"Hello! Look at that. That's where we want to go, too."

The Indian had slipped swiftly into a small log building standing by itself on the river-bank and bearing a sign: "LaCroix Logging Company, Office."

Save that it was more carefully and strongly put together, the office building might have been a cabin in the woods. Its walls were made of thick logs, carefully hewed and fitted. Four small windows, one in each wall, served to let in the light, and in the heavy timber door a tiny pane of glass, high up, looked down the street of the settlement like a single vigilant eye.

Tom Pine cocked his head shrewdly as they approached and surveyed the building.

"Gaston Olaf," he said quizzically, "d'you know what that looks like to me? Looks like a little fort. Look how it stands right out there by itself on the river. Two men with Winchesters and plenty of cartridges could stand off this whole settlement if they had nerve. You can tell a man by his shanty, Gaston Olaf, as you know; but I'll be shot if I can figger the breed of the guy who dens up here."

The door opened slightly as they stood there, the Indian slipped out, and the door closed swiftly behind him.

"How, Charley?" greeted Gaston. "Man named Taggart camping here?"

"Mebbe so," grunted the Indian and passed by without looking up.

"Come on," said Gaston, "we can make a good Injun out o' him later on," and he pushed open the door.

CHAPTER V

DEVIL DAVE TAGGART

A THIN voice greeted them promptly. "If you're coming in, come in and close the door."

Gaston looked in the direction from whence came the voice and in a poorly lighted corner of the poorly lighted room made out a skull-capped head bent over a rude desk.

"You wish to see——"

The voice was almost servile. The head did not lift itself at their entrance. Its owner was busy with pencil and paper.

"A man named Taggart," replied Gaston.

"Yes, yes. Exactly. And you wish to see Mr. Taggart about——"

Still the skull-cap stared Gaston in the face.

Gaston bridled a little. He was not accustomed to the usages of the business world, nor to having underlings stop and question him when he sought to see any man, no matter what his position. For a moment he stood staring at the skull-cap, then his voice rattled the windows.

"I want to kiss him!" he roared. "What did you s'pose I wanted of him?"

The skull-cap went up; the pencil ceased scribbling. Gaston saw a large, roughly bearded face standing out of the half-light. A pair of tiny eyes were boring him through, and through the heavy moustache around the man's mouth he caught the gleam of two fang-like

teeth. He saw now that the man's head was huge, that it was sunken down on a pair of painfully bowed shoulders.

The man, although seated cramped at a desk, seemed to grow as he looked at him. At first he had judged him a thin-chested indoor man. Now he saw that he was enormously thick through the body, and that for a moment the power of him seemed to fill the room.

"I am Taggart," said the man meekly, and collapsed into his former position.

Gaston blinked. He felt that his first impression must have been right; the man was small and weedy. He wore a long frock-coat. No one but an indoor man would wear such a coat.

"My name is Thorson," said Gaston.

"Yes, yes." The man did not look up. "I have heard of you. I have heard of some of your—your playful little ways, let us say. I have often thought that we could be useful to each other. I have things to be done, sometimes, that require men of your calibre—men who are untamed, without respect for the law, and——"

He looked up suddenly, and again Gaston felt the blinding power of those half-hid eyes.

"You have considerable reputation for roughness, Mr. Thorson."

"Perhaps," replied Gaston. "What of it?"

Taggart coughed feebly.

"I have taken the trouble," he said in his thinnest voice, "to assure myself that your reputation is, in this respect, based on fact."

Again he coughed, pushing his chair back weakly.

"You see, I am no child myself," he whined, and stood up, a red-grey bearded giant, in spite of his ministerial frock-coat.

For a few seconds he stood thus, a grotesquely huge,

gnarled figure, filling his corner of the room, and then with a faint cough, he subsided into his chair.

"Mr. Thorson," he resumed, "do you realise that this country about here is in danger of becoming too—too, shall we say too civilised for real, true men of the woods to live in? We are at sort of a crisis here. Settlers, towns, and even railroads threaten to come into the district. Men of the old kind will be driven out. The country will become as tame as a back yard unless the people who seek to make it so are—er—discouraged."

"Run 'em out," said Gaston carelessly. "'Tisn't the first place where it's been done. Those fellows wouldn't leave any free woods if they had their way about it."

Taggart lifted his head and smiled.

"And does your partner——"

He nodded at Tom Pine.

"Same here," said Tom. "We're partners."

Taggart nodded.

"Well, then, gentlemen, we agree on that, as I knew we would, having taken the precaution to investigate your reputation for—er—for not being tame." His manner suddenly changed. "However, I am slightly disappointed in you, Mr. Thorson," he continued in his thin voice. "Brawling, fighting, frequenting saloons—such things are very distasteful to me."

Gaston took a sudden step forward.

"Mr. Taggart, with your nice black coat, you can keep that kind of talk behind your bristly old beard. I didn't come here to find out whether you liked my style or not. I don't care a hoot whether you do. And I'll let you know that that kind of talk doesn't go with me."

Taggart's teeth showed in a satisfied smile.

"Yes, yes. I understand. Youth, high spirits; yes, yes. Nevertheless, it is sinful, very sinful. And

wasteful, wasteful of good material. Mr. Thorson, you have just seriously damaged one of my camp foremen, very seriously damaged him. In fact, from what I hear, he is for the time being a total loss."

"You've heard of that? Why, it just happened. Oh, that Indian——"

"Yes, yes. I—through my friends—I manage to hear of most things that happen in this settlement as immediately afterward as may be. I also know of how you arrived in town. I commend you for your action in saving Miss Havens from the—the rough humour of intoxicated men.

"It is distressing to think of the roughness and carelessness of some of the men about here, particularly of this crew which I am sending to my new camp. They are a rather rougher outfit than ordinary. I have no doubt that I shall have trouble finding a man who is man enough to get them out of town, get them into camp and start them working. They are rather hard to control. Yes, I doubt if there is a man to be found about here who is man enough for the task—now that Murphy is disabled."

Gaston's neck began to swell. This man was playing with him, taunting him, the cock o' the woods!

"Mr. Taggart," he said in his best manner, "if this Murphy was so valuable to you, you should have kept him wrapped up carefully, so a real man couldn't lay hands on him and bust him up."

Taggart wagged his head, smiling the smile that showed the two fang-like teeth.

"Perhaps in a wrestling match, Mr. Thorson, you were his master," he whined. "Boys' play, horseplay. But handling a crew that is on a spree, handling two dozen big rough men, that's a different matter, very, very different, indeed."

"Do you mean to say that I—that I can't do it?"

Taggart wagged his head, still smiling.

The smile ate into Gaston's heart. It seemed to search out his very soul, to weigh him to the marrow of his bones, and to find him ridiculously, boyishly wanting. It seemed to him that this old man before him was chipping inches off his stature, was softening the metal of his manhood, was making him feel small. For the moment he forgot everything else; he even forgot the girl. This was the challenge; the primordial taunt which roused him as the lightning flash rouses thunder.

"Don't you think I'm man enough for your job?" he demanded.

"Oh, I don't say that, Mr. Thorson. I had not considered you as a possible successor to Murphy. No, no. This task—I had Murphy selected for it."

"And I broke Murphy like a boy, between my two bare hands," said Gaston. "Do you still say I can not do what he could?"

Taggart looked at him suddenly.

"Do you think you can?" he said in a fuller voice.

"That's the question." Gaston struck the desk. "Can I do it? Is it in me? Here are two dozen hard men—the hardest I've ever seen in the woods. They hate me because I broke their leader and gave them the dare—which they didn't take up. They're drinking, and they don't want to leave town. They would be ready to smash up any man who tried to take them to camp now. And there isn't probably one of them who wouldn't knife me if he had the chance.

"What will happen when they see that I'm the man who is going to yank them away from their whisky and put them in camp? What will they do? What will I do? That's the question. That's what draws me, Mr. Taggart. Not the chance of a job, but that. It's a challenge; it's a temptation to try, and—I'm

strong against everything but that kind of temptation. You ask me: 'Do you think you can?' I reply, 'Give me the job.'"

The skull-cap went down over the desk.

"All right." The pencil was busy on the paper. "You may try. The camp is ready. Camp Nine, a new camp, eight miles up the river on—— You don't know the country up there, do you?"

"Never been up there."

"Yes, yes, so I understood. This new camp is eight miles up the river—eight miles—on Thunder Lake. Ever hear of Thunder Lake? No; it's a small lake, eight miles away. It's Norway pine we're cutting up there; a small job; early drive. The camp is all ready, grub, tools and horses. All you have to do is to get the men up there—you'll find a working boss there; he'll put 'em to work. You're to get them up there and keep them at it. The sleighs are ready to haul the men out any time you wish to start. Your wages——"

"*Ptt!* Do you think I do this for money—for money alone?"

"For what, then?"

"For the fun of doing it—for fun."

"Your wages will be a hundred dollars a month," said Taggart, adding drily, "if you're able to come back and collect it. That's big wages for light work. The working boss at Camp Nine gets only eighty. That's just the figure that your job is worth, too. You will be paid the extra twenty dollars in order to make it to your interest to do one certain thing and do it well."

"What's that?"

"Keep your mouth shut. Keep it shut first, last and all the time! Keep it shut about Camp Nine. And if you absolutely have got to talk about Camp Nine, remember only this: it's on Thunder Lake and only eight miles away from the settlement; it's Norway pine that

we're cutting, and there's only a small batch of it."

The skull-cap flew up and Taggart was smiling genially.

"To tell the truth, Mr. Thorson, I've heard a lot about you. I've often wanted to get you on my payroll. I—I often have wanted a man like you who is not—not softened by civilisation, or bothered about laws, or any of that silly stuff; a man who makes his own laws. That's what I do, and I understand you do, too. Well, Thorson, you're a young man. I'm a powerful one. I've got a one-hand grip on this country around here, and I want to make it two-handed. A lot of small people are trying to keep me from doing it—dirty little squatters and settlers and so on. I am not a man of violence, Thorson. Conflict is distasteful to me. But you—ah, well, we shall see how you make out on your first task. But remember that the young man who makes himself David Taggart's fighting man will be one of the big men, one of the rich men of this country. Now, here is a list of the names of the men who are to go to Camp Nine. You can get sleighs—take two of them—any time you order them over at the company's barns. Can you start at once?"

"No," said Gaston, "I have decided to take in the dance here to-night first."

The skull-cap dropped again. Taggart shook his head.

"Ah, yes," he whined. "I have heard there is to be a dance. I do not approve of such frivolity. Harmless enough in itself, I have no doubt, but I fear it is only the stepping-stone to great sins and evils. You——"

"I will have the men in camp to-morrow morning," interrupted Gaston. "Is that good enough for you?"

The skull-cap nodded.

"And remember," came the whining voice, "Camp

Nine is on Thunder Lake, eight miles out, and we're cutting Norway pine."

Gaston drew in a long, hungry breath as he stepped out into the bright light of day. He looked at Tom Pine. Tom Pine shivered.

"That's just the way I feel, too," laughed Gaston. "Whew! That man tired me more than a day and night on a rough trail. He's an old swamp auger if there ever was one. Bores right into you and sucks the steam out of you and grins a little to let you know that he knows just how small you feel."

"I need a drink," said Tom Pine. "Come on. That doctor's stuff'll be about the right medicine."

They found the doctor waiting for them in his office.

"What ho, busy gents! You fellows don't waste time, do you? Come into town on the jump; knock over one of our bad citizens; give a little first aid to the injured; take a drink; waltz out; break the bad citizen's collar-bone; and stroll down and call on 'Devil Dave' Taggart just as if nothing had happened. Boys, I like you. I like the clip you travel at. Let us retreat from the prying public eye and introduce into our systems a little of that justly celebrated poisonous, irritating, habit-forming drug called 'hooch.'"

"We sure need it," admitted Tom Pine.

"Most people do after talking with Dave Taggart," chuckled the doctor as he led the way into the back room and produced the bottle. "See little Samson there?" He pointed to the big bulldog which came waddling to greet them. "Doesn't look like a party that anything would set back much, does he? Well, little Samson met Taggart one bright Sunday morning when they were both feeling fine, and Samson growled and showed his teeth. Taggart looked at him. Samson came home, tail between his legs, whining. Here's how, boys. And, say, talking about drinking,

and women, that man Taggart—he's the champion. Sprees about once a month. Awful! What'd he do to you?"

Gaston replied merely that he had been engaged to take Murphy's crew out to camp.

"Glorious gobs of joy! When are you going to start 'em? Don't let me miss it, will you? Man, you're taking your life in your hands. Guess that doesn't bother you, though, eh? When does the riot take place?"

"After the dance to-night."

"Hm, hm! The dance. I see. Well, I'd feel more confident that there was going to be a dance to-night if you'd told me that gang was going out before the dance."

"Why so?"

"Because—hm, hm—that bunch—they're talking—they're going to come and break it up."

Gaston smiled.

"Oh, that'll be all right," he said. "Say, Doc, let me use your razor."

CHAPTER VI

BROWN EYES CAN BE COLD

NEXT to a fight Gaston probably loved a dance above other things to be had in towns. Just as the shock of breast against breast in desperate battle woke within him the raging, tearing joy of the fighting man, so the strains of music, the sight of beaming eyes of young women, the sound of their laughter, the touch of their hands, stirred a strain in him which brought music to his laughing soul.

Then he relaxed. His eyes grew dreamy. He was an altogether different Gaston Olaf from the one who man-handled his fellow men on the slightest invitation.

He danced as might have been expected of him, with a lightness and grace that made his partner the envied of all women who beheld them. The woman who had Gaston Olaf for a partner counted herself fortunate; and Gaston did his best to dance with them all.

His reputation, his good looks, his ability as a dancer made him the hero of every dance he attended, and Gaston knew it. He knew what to expect as a matter of course when he entered a dance floor, and the bright, admiring looks from women's eyes were as light wine to him. Those looks never seriously turned his head, yet without them an evening to him would have been a failure.

Gaston Olaf went to the dance in Hale's new store in the mood that was customary to him in approach-

ing a dance. He did not enter until a lull in the dancing, when the dancers were waiting expectantly. The crowd—perhaps a dozen women and girls and fewer men—looked up at him as he came in. They did not rush forward to greet him; they did not cry out his name; even the women did not smile! Gaston stopped. He saw Dr. Sanders chatting with Hulda; Hale, also, he saw. His eyes ran around the crowd and picked out Miss Havens. A little gasp of delight escaped Gaston at the sight of her. He had often dreamed of beautiful women beautifully arrayed, and now his dream had come true.

The gown that Rose wore was a simple white party gown, but to Gaston it was a garment of beauty. Her throat was bare and small and round. On her feet glistened tiny slippers. And she was laughing merrily and using her eyes playfully—but not for him.

At the sight of him she stopped laughing and bowed stiffly. Her warm brown eyes grew cold, and Gaston's gay manner had vanished. He stood looking at her fixedly. The two fiddlers on a platform at the far end of the room laid their bows on the strings. Gaston smiled suddenly and crossed the floor to her side.

"I see you are not as glad to see me as you were this morning," he said; "but won't you dance one dance—this one—with me, at least?"

She strove to be severe, but the splendid audacity, the bright blue eyes, the flaming youth of the man, brought the light of mischief to her eyes.

"You seem confident. Suppose this dance is taken?" she said.

"That means it isn't."

"Why, how absurd! You don't know anything about it."

She looked up at him and laughed, a little nervously.

He held out his arm. She looked at his eyes again.

"I tell you—" The music struck up— "Oh, all right."

She was in his arms. They were actually dancing together, and she was laughing and conscious that he danced very well.

"I'm merely doing it to avoid a scene," she twitted, with a mischievous toss of her head. "I've no doubt that you'd have been rude if I'd refused—after what I've heard about you."

"Dance!" he laughed. "Let us dance while we're dancing. I see that something is wrong; I see I'm not wanted here, but let's live in the meantime. Let's enjoy this dance if we never have another."

"I am not—I'm not accustomed to being treated like this."

"I am not accustomed to having girls refuse to dance with me."

"Oh, modest man!"

"I wouldn't be honest if I pretended to be."

"Are you always honest?"

"Always—except when it is amusing to be something else."

"Are you amusing yourself now?"

He waited some steps before replying.

"All my life I have lived to amuse myself," he whispered, his words blending with the scraping of the fiddles. "Amusement, excitement, thrills, fun! They have been all that have interested me. Never, never, until this morning have I thought that anything else would be worth while."

She laughed shortly.

"And then you reformed. I heard about you in MacCarthy's saloon."

The music stopped. Gaston deliberately led her to a corner where they were alone.

"Is that it? Is that why you were as warm and friendly as an icicle in your greeting?"

"I did not want to seem unfriendly in my greeting," she said bitterly. "I do not want to appear ungrateful for what you did this morning. I am grateful. I feel under obligation to you. But I am disappointed in hearing that you—that you—well, there is so much brawling, and fighting, and disorder here now that when a new man comes to town and begins——"

"I see. When he begins to take part in saloon fights——"

"Why in the world did you do it?" she blazed. "How can you do it? You are a man of intelligence; you're above the sort of men who do such things. Why did you do it?"

Gaston looked at her so steadily, so burningly that she shifted her gaze.

"Do you want me to tell you why I did it?" he asked.

"Yes. I'd like to hear an apparently intelligent man's reason for creating disorder."

"All right then." His blue eyes burned her, and she was conscious of something in the living, dancing depths of them that stirred her uncomfortably. "I hadn't thought of telling you, but now I will. Murphy dared to put his right arm around you. I picked a fight and broke his right collar-bone so he'd know that was a dangerous thing to do while I am around."

"How dared you?" she flared, but his eyes caught hers and held her.

He was too strong for her. She wilted and grew confused.

"I do not thank you for indulging in a barroom fight on my account," she said, looking away. "I—it disgusts me. I sincerely hope, if that is your kind—if you are going to add to the trouble we have had here—that you will not be stopping long in Havens Falls.

And if you do, I hope you will not intrude yourself on the people who are trying to make the town decent and peaceable enough for decent people to live in."

She was gone, and Gaston was left alone, dumfounded. Hale, his arm in a sling, and his square, sober face genial in spite of its disfiguration, and Dr. Sanders came up to him. Hale held out his left hand.

"I'm much obliged for this morning, Thorson," he said quietly. "I'll remember that."

"Just been telling Hale about your job to get that gang out to camp," said Dr. Sanders. "He's kind of puzzled about it. Hale knows the country around here like a book; tramps all over it; says it's got a great future; iron in some of the ridges; brick-clay along the river; and a great farming country all around. But he doesn't know of any Thunder Lake."

"But that doesn't say it isn't there," supplemented Hale. "Only, I've never ran across any lake with pine left on it within eight miles of here. Miss Havens has got a nice bunch of white pine up on Loon Lake, but that's twelve miles away, so it couldn't be that."

But the blood was pounding in Gaston's temples; his throat was dry with anger. Never in his life had any girl talked to him in this fashion. He scarcely heard what Hale and Sanders were saying. He didn't trouble to hear. She had humiliated him, the proud, the strong Gaston!

He tugged at his collar. What mattered it what Hale was saying? What had he to do with these town people? He knew where he belonged; he would go there at once.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he said, bowing to Hale and Sanders. "I've got work waiting for me."

Near the door he stopped before Rose and made a low bow.

"Good-bye, Miss Havens," he said. "The brutal,

disorderly, barroom fighter now goes back to his own kind."

"Oh!" The little muscles tightened about her mouth, but her eyes were troubled. "I—I never said anything of the sort," she stammered.

But Gaston was on his way, striding down the street toward where the red lights, the riot and song, the rattle of pianos, the mad laugh of women, and all the forces of sin and disorder beckoned and threatened.

CHAPTER VII

A MAN'S SIZE JOB

A BLIND man, provided his ears were normal, would not have had the slightest difficulty in realising that something out of the common was brewing in Jack MacCarthy's saloon that night as Gaston Olaf came down the street. First, the other saloons in the row were strangely deserted for that time of the night; second, bartenders, gamblers and others, who were unable to leave their places of business, peered from shuttered doors or curtained windows in the direction of Jack's; third, Jack's place was packed with a crowd that was strangely silent.

The silence impressed Gaston. It was unnatural. At that time of night MacCarthy's should have been the abode of profane noises.

Gaston Olaf directed Tom Pine to hie him hence to the company's stables and order up the two sleighs, and moved silently up to Jack MacCarthy's door. Not a foot was moving inside, not a man was roaring. It was uncanny.

Gaston peered over the low green blinds. One of Murphy's companions of the morning, a crop-haired, broken-nosed man, was addressing the roomful of men. Gaston put his ear to the keyhole and listened.

"We can get that guy who put the bug on Red Shirt, too," the broken-nosed one was growling. "He's up there at the dance. Make 'em all sick of this burg at the same time. The orders is to clean those good people out so strong that they'll be ready to pack up

and hike to-morrow. Well, we'll do a little personal job on the side. We'll get that big fresh guy at the same time."

"Get him good! I'll stomp his fresh face in! Gas-bag Thorson! If I get a jab at him with my chiv, I'll let the gas out o' him all right!"

"All right, then. Now come on. We want to take 'em by surprise. 'Bout four of us'll 'tend to him while the others beats up the rest of them——"

Gaston slipped in swiftly, closed the door behind him, shot the bolt to, and stood with his back against the door, regarding them with a look of contempt. The leader, who had been near the door, recoiled and drew back; the rest stared, open-mouthed.

Gaston, a sneering smile on his lips, took time to let his eyes single out each man in the throng. He saw that there were over twenty men present, and he judged rightly that here was the whole gang of Murphy's ruffians assembled. His sneer grew larger as he noted the faces of them. Whisky, dirt, disease, and worse had its mark upon all of them. Their scarred, bloated faces—some of them indubitably marked by jail—were at home in MacCarthy's; they would have been out of place out in the woods.

Gaston looked in vain for the bright, fearless eye, the free swing of the shoulders that marked the true woodsmen. Lumberjacks some of them were, undoubtedly; but not one there was who belonged in the woods.

Gaston shook his head. He had expected to vent his rage in a fight, but these men weren't worth the trouble.

"Of all the low, miserable off-scourings of hell, you are the worst I've ever seen," he said slowly. "How many jails and lodging-house saloons were combed to produce such a bunch of scums? You poor, dirty,

whisky-soaked saloon sweep-outs! You low-down, rotten, sheriff-dodging, drink-cadging bunch of rats! The best you've got nerve to do is to shove a knife in some lad who's laid out stiff, and you—" his voice rose suddenly, like the clang of sharpened steel—"and you kid yourselves into talking about getting *me!*"

His eyes again roamed over them, a little flame of fury in them now, and lighted on the gang's leader. The leader was probably ten feet from Gaston. He shivered as Gaston's eyes found him. He wanted to sneak farther back, but those eyes held him. Gaston looked back at the crowd. The leader sighed audibly.

"Why, you cheap, city crooks!"

Like the flash of something elemental, his eyes still on the crowd, Gaston leaped forward. The gang leader squealed once. Then Gaston was back at the door, and his left hand was holding the man, while his eyes still held the crowd.

"If there was a sound man among you—" he flung the man aside without looking, as a busy terrier might fling a rat—"if you were anything but a bunch of yellow crooks you'd have had me down under your caulks five seconds after I entered this room."

The devils of wrath suddenly flamed in him, and he raged across the floor, up and down before them, like a tiger panting to leap upon its prey.

"You talk about going up and getting me. I've come after it. Come on. It's easy picking. You can't fight, but half of you've got knives. Come on. You've stuck men in the back before. Hop to it! One of you'd have a chance to sneak around on me sure. Grab hold. I wouldn't be able to kick the guts out of over half of you before you'd get me down. Do it now, and get it over with, for, by the Lord! if you ever try it after this and I find it out, I'll hunt the last man of you down and beat his brains out with his own leg.

"Last call. You'll never hold up your heads to me again if you don't get me now. You'll eat out of my hand. You'll do what I say or I'll put you in the hospital. What? Nothing doing?" He stepped back. "All right then. Get your turkeys together if you've got any; for I'm your new boss in place of Murphy, and you're going to start for camp right now!"

One man, and one only, questioned this last statement, a young man almost of Gaston's own size, with his youth all run to whisky-bloat, and the shifty eyes of a crook.

"We start for camp when we get —— good 'n' ready," he growled. "Ain't anybody going to hurry us."

Gaston whirled upon him and stood, head thrust forward, watching him for a moment between narrowed lids. The young man suddenly felt sorry that he had spoken, and sought to slink behind a companion.

"Come here, you," said Gaston sharply.

He did not speak again. His eyes bored the youth through, and his forefinger beckoned irresistibly. Sullenly the big fellow slouched forward, helpless from fright, yet defiant by right of the youth left in him.

"What'a yah want?" he snarled.

"I want to look at you. Come nearer."

The young man stood before him, an ox led to slaughter, his arms useless at his sides, his eyes dumbly pleading for mercy. The crew shuffled a little in sympathetic agony as Gaston's cold stare froze the young fellow into abject terror. Each instant they expected to see a flash of long arm, and hear the youth thud, like a stricken ox, on the floor.

Gaston did not strike him. He did worse. He removed the fellow's cap and tossed it away. He slapped his face. He took the victim by the jaw and thrust the

head far back; he pushed with the heel of his hand on the man's nose until he seemed about to rub it off his face. He rubbed his ears, stabbed his fingers lightly against his eyes, rocked his head with light, contemptuous cuffs. It was cruel man-breaking, carried to the final degree of subtle brutality, and it did its work.

"Hit me!" blubbered the fellow piteously. "Hit me, and have it over with."

For reply Gaston thrust him back into the crowd, wiped his fingers carefully on his handkerchief, and with a look of disgust, tossed the handkerchief away.

"Is there any one else who thinks he isn't going to start for camp right now?" he asked coldly.

It was a superfluous question. They would have gone anywhere, done anything, anything to be rid for the moment of the pressure of his cruel will. A grunt of relief escaped from several as the sleighs pulled up outside and a teamster, whip in hand, and heavily muffled, entered.

"All right, boss; ready to start whenever you are," he said. "Let's get going soon's we can; the horses can't stand long in this weather."

Gaston promptly began to call out the names on the list Taggart had given him. At each name a man sullenly went into the back room, took his bag or satchel from the pile stored there, and hurried out to the sleighs. Two failed to respond, being helpless from liquor.

"Load them," commanded Gaston. "One in each sleigh."

When the sleighs were loaded, each with its freight of a dozen cowed or dead-drunk men, he leaped up beside Tom Pine on the driver's seat of the second sleigh.

"Just a minute, Thorson." Dr. Sanders, who had been watching the events in MacCarthy's with a grin on his face, stepped up and spoke in a low voice. "If I

were you I'd go back to the dance—just for a minute anyway."

"Why?"

"Somebody wants to see you before you go."

Gaston's laughter was as cold as the Winter night.

"No, thanks. I'm one of the toughs. I don't belong up there. Let 'em go, driver."

"Whoa! Pull 'em up a second!" The doctor was very much in earnest. "Thorson, do you know anything about the man you're working for?"

"You bet; he's a man with the hair on. He doesn't want to make a Sunday-school out of the woods. Look out, Doc—they'll step on you."

The doctor sprang back as the prancing team moved forward.

"Thorson," he shouted as the sleigh swept past, "I'll bet you the drinks that some day you'll be sorry for being such an impetuous fool!"

CHAPTER VIII

A CROOKED TRAIL

GASTON heard, and laughed loudly in reply.

"Let 'em go, driver!" he commanded. "Get out of town as quick as they'll travel. Shake 'em up. Plenty of time to walk 'em when we're out on the road, away from the lights."

"Giddap, boys! Steady—steadyee! Giddap—git out of there!"

The big logging-teams, ramping with high feeding and leisure, nipped by the cold, and hitched to loads that were playthings to them, needed no second urging. With smoking nostrils and heads well down they tore down the street for the road up the river.

Maudlin screams of rage, laughter, invitation and contempt came from the red-light places as the two sleigh-loads pulled past. A few of the men answered back drunkenly; a medley of curses and laughter, flaming lights, open doors. Then they were past.

The shouting died down abruptly. They were on the river road, speeding into the silent darkness of a tamarack swamp, and the lights and noise were suddenly left behind.

Gaston breathed a great sigh of relief as he cast a look upward at the starlit sky, which showed above the dark tamaracks.

"Well, Tom Pine, we didn't stay long in that town," he laughed.

"Not long enough to hurt us if we're through with it now," admitted Tom Pine.

"Through with it?" A tiny, troubling thought shot through Gaston's mind. Then he laughed it away. "Of course we're through with it; this is the game for us. Lay low there, you bums! Don't try any flopping out of the sleigh on me. Any man tries to get away, I'll drag him into camp at the end of a chain behind the sleigh."

He glowed; he laughed. Life was at its fierce flood-tide for him for the time being. No time for regrets, for introspection, for thoughts of what might have been. What had he to do with long-lashed brown eyes, with scornful little mouths, with tiny, tripping feet? He was playing the stern old man-game, which he was bred to play; and the game was strong drink to his restless blood, blotting out memories, emotions, all, in the fierce exultance of the game. For Gaston was one of the battle-breed. Life to him must mean war or it lost its savour; and he had that now—out in the black, lawless woods, himself and two dozen men, any one of whom would knife him eagerly if for a moment his grip on them slackened.

Gaston sat upright beside the driver and hummed an old tune of his rough Norse sire's teaching.

Mile after mile the tote-road ran, straight as a sword-gash, dark and narrow as the road to the pit, through the tamarack swamp. The horses now had settled down to their rough, heavy-limbed walk, plumping doggedly ahead in the dark, the trace-chains jangling.

The sleighs were becoming silent. The drink was dying out in most of the men, and the steady, even slipping of the sleighs began to lull them to slumber. To those who remained awake the eerie humming from the second sleigh reminded them that Gaston was awake and watchful. What little rebellion remained in them died rapidly out. The sleighs went on in si-

lence, save when some man swore at his neighbour's crowding.

The ground at last grew higher, the tamaracks gave way to hard wood and pine, and a clearing with a group of dark cabins showed in the timber.

"An old camp?" queried Gaston.

"Naw!" laughed the driver. "That's where some of those fellers that Hale brought up here tried to settle with their families."

"Where are they now?"

The driver snickered.

"Wall, they're sort of scattered. A couple of 'em are down at the Falls. The rest figgered this country was a leetle too hard for 'em and skedaddled."

"What was the matter?"

"Oh, nothing much, nothing much. But, you see, them cabins was on the road to the old man's camps, and sometimes the boys 'ud stop in on their way from town and, well, them settlers figgered 'twas healthier to move."

A short distance farther on a similar clearing and clump of dark cabins appeared.

"What's this?" asked Gaston. "The same thing?"

"Shore." The driver was silent a moment, then continued, "That's where the rumpus happened that started 'em moving out—couple years back."

"What was that?"

"Oh, they was kind of a hard old-timer named Olsen settled down there, and he said that, by Cripes! he'd picked his claim, and he'd settled and was going to stay settled, and there wasn't any gang hard enough to run him out of the country. Some o' the boys was going back to camp sort o' tanked up one night and they stopped in on him, and told him this was an awful hard country and settlers wasn't wanted, but

they guessed they'd take his woman and girl along to camp to cook for 'em.

"So they got hold of the women, and the old guy—he was the pure quill all right—he got hold of an ox-yoke, and when the gang got back to camp they had one of the boys in the sleigh too dead to skin. He put up a great fight, the old guy did, when they went back to get him; but they got him. Then the rest of the settlers got scared and cleared out."

Gaston whistled.

"That was pretty rough. Who owns the claims now? Did they have 'em proved up before they left?"

"Proved up, nothing. They ain't any proved-up claims 'round here. It's all open yet, the claim land. The old man owns most of the timber land 'round here, o' course. Then Havens's girl's got what her old man had, pieces here and there, and that fellow Hale got some people together and bought some that had been proved up, cleared land mostly, to make farms out of. The rest is open to homesteading, but there ain't none of it being done, except by a few of the old man's standbys."

"Why so?"

"Ain't I been telling you it's unhealthy for new settlers trying to horn in here? Like this Olson—he was getting along to where it looked like he might stick, and an accident happened to him, and his widow and girl are down to the Point running the hotel."

"What? Are they——"

"Sure. Hale got the hotel put up for 'em, I understand. Mebbe Doc Sanders and old Perkins, the postmaster, chipped in a little, too. Those fellers certainly like to monkey with the buzz-saw. They seen plenty signs by this time of what happens to folks that try to take holt here, unless they're working for Taggart.

"Not that the old man has anything to do with it,

of course," he added hurriedly, "but it just happens that way. The old man kind of naturally gets hard guys around him, and they don't care for those settlers and town guys who're trying to tame this country down. Just happens, you know. Old man kind of happens to get hard men on his payroll, and," he concluded with an admiring grin at Gaston, "when I heard he'd got you, I sez to the boys, 'Boys, he's got the hardest of 'em all now, and there'll be more softies scared away from here when they hear it, and you darn know it.'"

Gaston slowly stiffened himself to his straightest and slowly turned toward the talkative figure beside him.

"Pardon me, my friend," he said, puzzled, "but let's have that over again. What was it you said about the 'softies'?"

"Why, I just said there'd be some more of 'em skedaddling out of this neck of the woods when they heard that Taggart had got you with him."

Gaston still was puzzled.

"And why do you say that, my friend? Why should any of the 'softies' skeddadle because they heard I'm working for Taggart?"

"Haw, haw!" The driver guffawed appreciatively. "Trying to play fox with the old tote-teamster, eh? Why shouldn't it make 'em move? They'd heard of you; the old man had let 'em know that he expected to get a stiff guy in here pretty soon. Then you do come, and you do show you're a stiff guy, breaking 'Red Shirt' all to pieces, and taming this gang of wolves; and, well, when these would-be settlers hear of it they'll just about figure the gang will be too strong for 'em, and they'll give up."

Gaston sat silent. He began to hum, but the tune ended in discord. Another spell of silence ensued.

"My friend," he said at length, "your meaning be-

gins to soak through my thick head like rain through a mackinaw. You mean that the settlers and the other 'softies' will think that I am one of the gang—of the sort of a gang that went to call on old man Olson?"

"Think it!" The driver cackled. "Pretty foxy, you are. Of course; they'll know you're one of the gang. You can't keep that hid, boss."

Gaston slowly collapsed until he sat hunch-shouldered with bowed head. He tried to hum again, but the wild notes died in his throat. He tried to whistle and could not. He sat silent for a space, and then he exploded—

"Hell!"

As suddenly as he had exploded he grew silent and thoughtful.

"What 'smatter, Gaston Olaf?" muttered Tom Pine sleepily.

"Nothing, nothing is ever the matter," snapped Gaston. "Not unless a man is fool enough to stop and think. Shake 'em up, driver! How long you going to take to cover eight miles?"

The drivers had pulled up on the crest of a long, steep ridge to give the horses a moment's breathing spell, and as Gaston looked back over the direction they had come he saw that the ridge topped all the surrounding country. On a clear day a man might stand there and look over the tree-tops and see even as far as Havens Falls. But now it was very dark on the ridge-top, and no eyes could make out the figure that suddenly hailed them from the brush:

"Taggart's teams?"

The voice was deep and heavy, and obviously disguised, and yet to Gaston there was a tone in it which he seemed to have heard somewhere before, though he could not then remember where or when.

"None of your —— business?" he snapped back at the darkness.

Came a chuckle in reply—

"Oh, all right."

Then he heard the crackle of breaking brush, and the *plup, plup, plup* of snow-shoes slipping briskly away.

"Who was that—one of the gang?" asked Gaston.

"I donno," said the driver carelessly. "But you was saying we was taking too long to make eight miles," he continued quickly. "Now right from here where we're standing to Havens Falls, that's five miles by the road we come. Now we go down this ridge, that's a mile; then we swing off and follow the West Branch to the lake, that's about two'n a half, and then to the camp, at the far end of the lake, that's another mile. 'Bout eight miles and a half, I make it to this new camp, and we'll be there inside of half a hour. No, I can't say I think we're taking long on the road, Boss. Giddap, boys—go 'long!"

Gaston made no reply. Something was whispering to him, telling him to keep his eyes and ears open and his mouth shut; that something remarkable lay before him, as often in the woods his keen intuition or woods-sense often warned him of the presence of big animals, or, when on the river, he sensed the presence of dangerous rapids ahead long before the roar of the waters came to his ears.

Five miles from the ridge to Havens Falls! And the driver said it earnestly, as if he thought he would be believed. And that voice from the dark on top of the hill. What of that? Something strange was in the air.

Gaston crossed his legs contentedly. He began to hum. The tune had come back to him now. Above the plump of the horses' hoofs, the rattle of trace-chains and the whine of sleigh-runners rose his hum-

ming. It ascended in the dark woods like some chant of battle, as wild, as reckless, as lawless as the primitive woods themselves. Gaston was happy. He was driving toward the unknown. But he had sensed enough of what lay ahead to know that it promised excitement.

At the foot of the ridge they came to a cluster of buildings, apparently an old logging-camp, on the banks of a small river, and to Gaston it seemed that the road ended there. Beyond lay the close-standing tamaracks of the river bottom, and he looked in vain for the break in their ranks that marked the presence of a road. To his astonishment the first sleigh pulled straight toward the log wall of what was apparently a bunk house, built close to the river.

"Hi!" called the lead teamster gruffly.

"All right," came a reply from within the building, and then a section of the wall—a section which Gaston now saw was merely slabs instead of solid logs—slid aside like a barn door on rollers, and through the opening gleamed the white ice of the frozen river.

"Come ahead. Ice safe—keep going."

The teams lunged through the door on the trot. Gaston saw that the building had been a bunk house, but that now the wall nearest the river had been torn down.

Across the river there was no made road. The teams quickly pulled up to a walk and began warily to pick their way along a crude wagon trail through the tamaracks.

"No tote road?" asked Gaston casually.

"No tote road," agreed the driver.

"Not much teaming up this way?"

"Ain't calcilated to be. Small camp, short job. Be cleaned up in a month or six weeks, 'bout the time the

ice goes out. Camp's all fitted up. No need for much teaming."

Gaston resumed his humming.

"That was a new one on me, that building with the road through it," he laughed, after a while. "What's the idea?"

"Oh, I donno." Obviously the driver did not wish for further conversation. "You better ask the old man if you hanker to know."

"All right," said Gaston, "I will."

He did not speak again until they reached their destination, but his eyes and his thoughts were busy. And he noted as they pulled across the lake and reached the camp at its head that the timber that stood large, straight and fine all around was not Norway pine, but *white pine.*

Lanterns flashed at their arrival. A man, who in build and vicious expression was a counterpart of Red Shirt Murphy, came out and took charge.

"Got 'em out, did you?" he greeted Gaston. "All right, I'll unload 'em. Fine bunch of men for the woods, ain't they? We'll give 'em —— to-morrow to start 'em in right. Hear you busted Red Shirt up a little." Gaston wondered how the news had come out there, but said nothing. "He's my brother, the ——! They call me 'Black' Murphy. Wish you'd broke his neck."

Gaston and Tom Pine stood to one side and watched the unloading of the cowed, shivery gang. Most of the men were able to stagger stiffly to their bunks without assistance, but a few, the teamsters, under Murphy's direction, dragged like so many sacks of grain through the snow and dumped on the bunk-house floor. When the task was completed Gaston turned to Tom Pine, who was standing alone, looking around in puzzled fashion.

"Tom Pine," he said, "how long have you been in the woods?"

"Longer than you've been alive, Gaston Olaf," replied Tom.

"Do you see any Norway pine around here?"

"Nope."

"And did you ever see anybody make such crooked trails as this in the logging business?"

Tom Pine scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Once, Gaston Olaf, once I did."

"Where was that?"

"One time—one time old Ezra Howlinson, him that's Senator Howlinson now, made a raid on the Couderay Indian Reservation timber. He rounded up a lot of bad ones who were hiding from the sheriff mostly, and did the thing on the quiet. I was drunk, and I joined in with 'em. I was young then, Gaston Olaf."

"Yes."

"Ye-es. And do you know what, Gaston Olaf?"

"What?"

"I been thinking—I been thinking about old Ezra's raid ever since that guy hollered at us on top of the ridge."

CHAPTER IX

"NOT A WHITE MAN'S OUTFIT"

A VOICE woke Gaston next morning in his upper bunk, a voice thin and querulous, and cold as ice. It was still dark, and Gaston had slept little, but that voice woke him like a dash of cold water.

"Well, well, Murphy; so you don't think much of the crew I've sent you?" The voice came from the corner of the room near Gaston's bunk. "Well, well, we all have our tastes. For instance, Murphy, there was a gentleman in Havens Falls last week who actually was anxious for your company. He was indeed. He seemed to hanker for you. Now for myself, Murphy, it is a trial to be forced to spend even a few minutes in your loathesome society. But this gentleman, he asked for you diligently. He even wished you to accompany him back to LaCroix County, Murphy. It seems there was a little safe-blowing done back at the bank there. Also, at the same time, a murder. Yes, yes. I forgot to say that the gentleman was the sheriff of LaCroix County. It was the marshal you killed! Heh, heh, heh!"

"He—he went away again—the sheriff—Mr. Taggart?" That was Murphy's voice, barely able to utter the words.

"Heh, heh! The rope, eh, Murphy, the new, stiff rope, and the black cap, and a little platform—well, well! We won't speak of that. I imagine it isn't pleasant to you. No, Murphy, we won't speak of it again unless you fail to get full work out of the crew I've

given you; unless you fail to have the lake full of logs by the time the river's open; unless you fail to keep every man jack in camp until the job is done. In short, Murphy, unless you fail to please me."

"I'll do it, Mr. Taggart," said Black Murphy in his dry voice. "I'll murder any man who begins to get funny and ask questions."

"No details, Murphy, please. I do not wish to know how you do things. I merely wish them done. Now, as for getting the work out of the men, I have got this young man, Thorson. I am something of a judge of men, Murphy, and I am sure this young man will make the best man-breaker and man-driver I have ever seen in the woods. His partner is a nonentity; you can let him drive team. But, Thorson, Murphy, you must bow to Thorson. Yes, Murphy, with proper education I am sure I can make a better brute out of him even than of you.

"So, remember, Murphy, I will have no quarrelling with him. Let all be peace between you. Heh, heh, heh! Not much peace for a man when he thinks of the rope, is there, Murphy? Well, well! And come over the hill and report to-night. I'll stay there till to-morrow. Now roust the men out as soon as I'm out of camp, and get them to work."

There was the sound of steps as they both cautiously left the bunk-house. After a while Murphy returned; and then his voice rang out harshly:

"Roll out! Roll out!" He tramped around the room, making a din to wake the dead-drunk. "Get out and get at it! Roll out before you get cold water on you!"

Gaston leaped down as if suddenly awakened.

"Hello, boss," he greeted sleepily. "Want me to help get 'em out?"

"Sure, if you want to," replied Murphy, and to-

gether they began to drag the reluctant ones from their bunks.

Gaston worked with a will. He was anxious to see what Taggart intended for him, and he realised that his rôle for the present must be that of the apparently unthinking driver of men. He chuckled at the spectacle presented by the men at the breakfast table. The alcoholic ebullition and spirit of the night before had burned out, and the men were down to their true level. Shuffling, cringing, shivering, they staggered in to eat; broken men, shaky for want of the morning drink, every last one of them.

"Boys," said Black Murphy, as they swilled their food, "you've had your good spree. You've been on it a week. Now you're going to work. This is a short job. We'll knock it down in a month if we work. Then you can all go back to town. You've all come out here pledged to stay till that's done. Understand? There's no leaving camp till the job's done. That's the bargain, and the man who tries to sneak out—well, he'll never make it, that's all. That's the old man's orders. Do you all hear me?"

"That's the bargain," growled a few in reply. "We're next."

"And there won't anybody come out here looking for anybody if you don't get funny," supplemented Murphy.

There was a ducking of frowzled heads at this, as if each man suddenly grew sensitive.

"And now having heard that you're safe here, you cheap crooks"—it was Gaston Olaf speaking now—"having heard that no sheriff will be allowed to come out and get any of you, it's time you got out and hustled. Where do you start logging, Murphy?"

"Right outside of camp, along the lake. We'll log in from the lake."

"All right. You throw 'em at the work, and I'll see they keep going. You set the wedge, I'll drive it in. How's that?"

"Suits me," said Murphy. "Come on, boys, pick out your tools and get started."

It was boy's play, the logging that was laid out for them. The trees grew to the very edge of the bluffs overlooking the small, shut-in lake. To fell the trees, log them up, skid them to the edge of the bluff and roll them over was all that was required. There were no roads to be built, little swamping to be done, no loading.

The pine—white pine all of it—grew tall and free, unhampered by small trees or underbrush, and Gaston saw that even the gang of wrecks he had brought out from town would turn out a respectable cut each day. As the great tops of the first trees began swaying as the saws rasped through, he looked from their noble trunks to the men who were nibbling with such deadly effect at their butts, and he turned away with an exclamation of disgust.

"That's the way I feel, too, Gaston Olaf," said Tom Pine, halting at Gaston's side the team he had been given to skid with. "I never did like to see the big trees go down, but for pines like them"—he looked with true reverence up at the magnificent trunks—"to be downed by fellows like these, it—it don't seem to jibe. I—I don't feel much like I want to be in on this job, Gaston Olaf. There's a stink around here, with that lie about the kind of pine here, and all. It's not a white man's outfit. You know that yourself."

"You're hard to please, Tom Pine," laughed Gaston. "When we were in town you wanted to get back into the woods. Now we're here and you want to travel again. What's the matter: got a feeling that something different is going to happen here, too?"

"Well, it did happen in town, didn't it?"

"You bet! And that's what I'm looking for here too. I want something different to happen, Tom Pine, something that will tell me why this outfit makes such funny, crooked trails. You skid logs and say nothing for a time, Tom Pine. I'm going to look around. I got a scent that may take me to where the thing that made these trails is bedding down."

"And then what?"

"Then what? Why, some excitement, let's hope, Tom Pine. What else would I hunt the end of the trail for? Fun, excitement! Tom Pine, I got a hunch that there's a whole raft of it somewhere before us."

When the opportunity offered, Gaston slipped out of sight of the men into the forest. He was curious about Taggart. Where was "over the hill," where Murphy was to report to Taggart that evening?

There were plenty of hills about, in fact the lake was ringed with hills, but out in the untracked snow of the woods Gaston looked only for Taggart's trail. He found it at last on the ice of a tiny water course, where the tracks scarcely showed, and he followed it away from camp at full speed.

The trail curved for half a mile around the foot of a hill, then dipped through a ravine, and seemed to end abruptly in a close-growing clump of small cedars, snugly hidden in a tiny valley.

A column of blue smoke, rising from the centre of the cedars, drew Gaston forward. He left the trail and circled carefully, skilfully keeping himself hidden, and crept slowly forward under the low-hanging branches into the heart of the thicket. He had not gone far when he crouched suddenly, and sat staring in amazement. Before him, hidden from the world by four walls of trees, lay a small clearing, and in the clearing was a comfortable, well-built log house.

Compared to the average settler's cabin the place even manifested evidences of taste, wealth and luxury on the part of the owner. Large-paned windows in solid, planed frames; a high-pitch roof, neatly shingled; a milled door; lace curtains on the windows; and a neat brick chimney topping it all, were among the surprising differences between this house and the common log cabins of the country. The place was not builded as were other cabins of the big woods—a mere, heavy-walled shelter against cruel Winter weather. It was built for the delight of the ones who lived in it, and the job was well done.

The artistic side of Gaston's nature was moved. He saw that the door stood slightly ajar, and began to crawl toward a position where it might be possible to peek inside the house. Suddenly from within there came to his ears the rattle of a piano, snatches of song, and the tinkling, reckless laughter of women.

"What's this—what's this?"

The blood in Gaston's young veins was leaping in response to the music, the laughter of women. He crouched, with his hands parting the branches before him.

> And he'll never come back, no, he'll never come back,
> Your lover you'll ne'er see alive.
> Then another I'll get, he will help me forget
> My lover who went down in the drive.

"Whoop-la!" whispered Gaston. It was a woman—nay, a girl—who was singing the crude old song, and her voice seemed to float out and draw Gaston forward. He could never resist that song. It had in its simple notes the joy and pang, the unreckoning loves, the sudden deaths of the life of the woods.

He leaned forward eagerly, too eagerly, for his head showed clear of the branches. He saw his mistake and

tried to draw back, but he was too late. The door flung open sharply. Devil Dave Taggart, his bulk filling the doorway, looked out, laughing.

"Come out of there, Thorson. Come out, man, and come in!" he called.

His voice was full and commanding. It was the voice that had hailed the sleighs on the hill the night before.

CHAPTER X

DEVIL DAVE AT PLAY

IT was a different Taggart who stood there in the doorway. Instead of the ministerial frock-coat, he wore a flaming red sweater. He stood with his head up, his shoulders straight and broad, and he was laughing in great, open-mouthed guffaws. There was no whine, no pettiness in his voice now; instead he roared like a bull.

His thick beard was disordered and blazing; his face was flushed and red; and Gaston saw to his amazement that he had been mistaken when he judged Taggart to be an elderly, decrepit man.

Gaston strode forward without hesitation. He had sprung to his feet the instant he saw that he was discovered, and his eyes had begun to blaze at the insinuation in Taggart's first words. More than this, he realised that he was caught in an undignified position, and the touch of vanity in his character set his blood boiling.

"You don't have to holler at me, my hairy old friend. My ears are first-rate," he growled as he came up to the door. "I'm not asking for a bid in. If I'd wanted to come in I'd have come. But when I see a trail that interests me, I've got a habit of doing a little tracking, and no favours asked from anybody in the world."

"Ho, ho, my boy! Spoken well; spoken as I want you to speak! Give me your paw and forget your hair-trigger temper."

Yes, it was a very different Taggart, indeed. The

ice had thawed. The Winter had gone out of his eyes and lips. It was full Summer; the river of life was running warm in him. The warmth encompassed Gaston as Taggart threw his long arm around his shoulder. The genial laughter of the old man was like a Summer breeze.

"Come in; come in, boy! Just in time. We'll have a celebration."

Before Gaston realised what was happening he was in the house, the door was shut, and he was joining in the laughter, warmed to the heart, and swept off his feet by the new Taggart's geniality and magnetism. His eyes took in the room at a glance, and he blinked and removed his cap. The room was an anomaly there in the woods. It had an oiled hard-wood floor, plastered walls, and delicate blue wall-paper. There were easy chairs, cushions, pictures, shaded lamps, a piano, rugs, and a canary in a gilded cage. A nest of luxury, and two women at the piano to complete the picture. One of the women was tall, dark, majestic of proportions, set of feature, and probably over thirty-five. The other was small, plump and blonde, childish of face, and probably twenty.

"My sister," said Taggart, indicating the tall woman. "And my little niece, Carrie."

> Oh, another man I'll get; he will help me forget
> My lover who went down in the drive.

sang the young girl, with her eyes on Gaston.

"Another bottle we'll get," laughed Taggart. "Sit down, Thorson."

The dark woman rose with a weary smile on her lips and stepped out of the room, to return in a moment with a bottle of champagne. Soon the glasses were brimming with the bubbling stuff, and Taggart drank,

filled his glass and drank again, smiling as the bubbles went down his huge, hairy throat.

"Drink, boy, drink!" he urged. "Don't look at it; don't save it. The cellar's full of it. Throw it into you."

Taggart had had much champagne this morning, Gaston now saw. It had warmed him, expanded him, made him blustering and reckless.

"The old Adam, Thorson," he chuckled, "the old Adam must out now and then. 'Tisn't good for man to keep the old Adam suppressed too long. On the other hand, 'It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to indulge in strong drink'—in public. Consequently I come out to my—to my sister's here, every once in a while and turn old Adam loose. 'All work and no play,' you know; this is my way of playing. Another bottle, Dell. Carrie, you may have a bottle of root-beer. Little nieces mustn't have strong drink."

The girl laughed and the dark woman smiled her enigmatic smile.

"Thorson, a toast!" Taggart waved his glass so the wine flew about the room. "A man's toast, Thorson; a hard man's toast. Join me?"

"You know me," laughed Gaston.

"I think so," Taggart nodded soberly. "I think I do. You are a man of my own calibre. Murphy—the two Murphys—and the rest of my gang, they're just scum. You—Thorson—you ought to go far with me. There's room for two big men in this neck of the woods, Thorson—just two. Not any more; not a lot of pulling, grubbing settlers; not a lot of whining storekeepers. But plenty room enough for two. I'm Number One; there's no reason why you shouldn't be Number Two. But there's only one way to do it: that's to keep the other fellows out. Keep 'em scared off. Keep 'em from getting a foothold. Settlers—ha,

ha! They're discovering what they'll meet with when they try to come ploughing up my stamping-ground."

He lolled in his chair, huge, barbaric, his red-grey beard bristling, the two fang-like teeth showing beneath it, his eyes red and leering.

"I want this country to stay the way it is!" he exploded. "I want it with the bark on. So do you—I know that! You and I can keep it that way, Thorson. And we're going to do it."

He chuckled in his beard.

> Oh, fill up your glasses steady,
> And hold up your glasses high.
> Here's to the dead already,
> And here's to the next man to die.

"Ha, ha! Pretty little thing, isn't it, Thorson? Who's going to be the next? Well, any man who tries to come nosing around my stamping-ground. And that's Hale. I hear he started this way this morning. Well, we're ready for him. Law? I make the law up here. And it's against my law to try to keep me from doing anything I want to do."

The girl was at the piano, singing and laughing; the dark woman was bringing another bottle of wine. The room was heavy with languorous perfume, and the wine had begun to warm Gaston's mind. And yet he was not at ease. Here was music and wine, woman and song. He was young and the blood in his veins coursed warmly. And yet he rebelled against all this.

"I've got to get back to camp," he said suddenly. "I'd only intended to be gone a few minutes. Murphy's grip on the men isn't strong enough to leave him alone. If you'll excuse me, I'll be going."

"All right." Taggart was all business again. "Logging is logging."

The dark woman smiled her strange smile.

Gaston went back to camp as straight and as rapidly as his legs could carry him.

"Tom Pine," he said, finding the little man alone, "something serious is the matter with me."

"Yes?" said Tom Pine.

"Tom Pine," continued Gaston, "I've always been something of a roarer when I had the chance, haven't I?"

"Well, you ain't exactly dead when you've got a chance to liven up, if that's what you mean."

"Did you ever know me to act bashful when I had wine and music and pretty women fairly thrown at me?"

Tom Pine spat.

"What's eating you, Gaston Olaf?" he demanded.

"We're going to travel," said Gaston suddenly. Tom Pine dropped the reins eagerly. "You were right, Tom Pine. This is no white man's outfit; it's no place for us. Taggart had me sized up wrong when he sent word for me. We're rough, Tom Pine, and we're tough; but I don't think we can work for Devil Dave."

"I said we couldn't," chimed in Tom. "There's a kind of a stink around here that I don't like."

"You said it," agreed Gaston. "Ready to travel?"

Tom nodded. Gaston turned the team toward the stables and slapped them with the reins.

"Giddap!" They waited and watched to see that the horses were travelling for shelter. "Now, come on."

Gaston swiftly led the way into the timber out of sight of the men of the camp, Tom Pine following, silent and unquestioning, as was his wont on their travels.

"We'll hit for the creek, then down to that old shack that we drove through, and then down the road to town."

"Sure thing," said Tom Pine. "But there'll probably be somebody there at that old shack, Gaston Olaf. They don't keep that gate there for nothing."

"I want to see if they do keep somebody there," replied Gaston, hurrying along. "I want to see how far the old man would go to keep anybody from nosing around his stamping ground."

"Devil Dave? He'd go the limit, I'll bet. Why; what you heard, Gaston Olaf?"

"Hale," said Gaston. "I heard he'd started out this way this morning."

"Hale?" repeated Tom. "That fellow who got his arm broke? What does he want out here?"

"I don't know, but I've got a suspicion."

"He's a town man, anyhow. What have we got to do with him?"

"Nothing; nothing to do—with Hale," snapped Gaston, and hurried along.

To their surprise they found no one at the building on the river where the road from town seemed to end. In one end of the shack was fitted up a room, with bunk and stove and a shelf of provisions. The stove was still warm, though the fire in it had died out.

"Gate-tender's off the job," said Tom Pine. He looked around reminiscently. "Gaston Olaf, d'you know what this reminds me of? Reminds me of the way old Ezra Howlinson kept strangers from accidentally wandering in on him when he was raiding that old Couderay Res'vation. Had a man with a shotgun—Hell's fire! What's that?"

From somewhere on the top of the ridge beyond there came faintly the *pop, pop* of a rifle fired twice slowly. Gaston and Tom looked at one another.

"Deer on a ridge this time of the year?" said Tom doubtfully.

"Deer nothing!" said Gaston, and started running

up the road toward whence the sound of the shots came.

There was nothing to be seen when he finally came panting to the top of the mile-long slope. Yes, there was something, after all. A pair of field-glasses lay in the snow between the sleigh tracks. Gaston picked them up; a bullet had smashed and torn them to pieces.

There was blood, too, not far away, a thin, smudged streak of red on the snow, and a spot where a man had fallen. The signs were as so much clear English to Gaston. He leaped toward the red marks. There it was, a dragging trail of red, and clumsy marks, such as a wounded animal makes, leading into the brush. And as Gaston stooped to view it more closely there came from the brush a voice—Hale's voice, by all that was holy—faint, but with its old quietness in it.

"Look out, boys! Jump in the brush. They got me when I was standing right there."

And in the brush Hale lay helpless, his well hand clutching his left leg, where a bullet had pierced the muscles below the knee.

CHAPTER XI

GASTON BEGINS TO THINK

GASTON and Tom Pine were too experienced to waste the next few precious seconds in exclamations. By the volume of red that spurted through Hale's clutching fingers, and by the tallow colour creeping about his mouth, they saw in a flash that their cue was to act instantly and in a desperate hurry.

Tom Pine's hunting-knife slit Hale's clothes to the skin in the same second that Gaston whipped off his red silken sash. They handled their patient roughly perhaps, but efficaciously. In a remarkably short time the bleeding was stopped, the leg thoroughly bandaged and Hale was sitting propped up against the trunk of a jackpine.

"Now a little hit of this and you'll be feeling alive again," said Tom Pine, producing a small flask from an inside pocket, but Hale, with the pallor and perspiration of pain on his face, set his jaw firmly and shook his head.

"Thanks; I'll stick it out without anything," he whispered.

"You will not," said Tom Pine. "You'll take a good hit. I know what's good for you."

"Leave him alone," said Gaston. "He's got ideas on that subject."

He scooped a great handful of clean snow and held it up to Hale's burning lips. The thirst of the bullet-torn was upon Hale and he gulped the snow feverishly and lay back refreshed.

"And now while we're waiting for you to come back to life enough to move you—what are you and your bum arm doing this far from home?" demanded Gaston. "Isn't a crippled arm enough for you at one time?"

Hale attempted to smile.

"Funny question, Thorson," he said with effort. "Natural thing to ask would be, 'Who did it?'"

"Oh, no. Funny thing to me isn't that you'd get shot, but that you'd be so far from town."

Hale looked up quietly. Gaston was conscious of a growing respect for this little town man. Yes; he realised that he was even inclined to like him; but he thought of the manner in which the girl had held her arm under Hale's head and felt instinctively that this man was his rival.

"Yes?" said Hale steadily. "All right. But if you're with Taggart, Thorson, why didn't you let me lie here and bleed?"

"With Taggart?" repeated Gaston. "Why d'you say that?"

"Well, if you're not with Taggart I don't see why you should be so strong against me."

"Twice I've picked you up now," laughed Gaston. "Does that look much like I was against you?"

Hale nodded.

"I'll remember that. If there's ever a chance——"

"——!" laughed Gaston. "Do I look as if I ever would need any help from you? Now, what were you doing out here?"

Hale sat silent for a while.

"I can't tell you that, Thorson," he said finally. "I don't know where you stand."

"All right. Then—who shot you?"

Hale looked up.

"Don't you know?"

"What?" Tom Pine and Gaston exploded as one.

"Why—why you little, stove-hugging, high-banker, you!" roared Tom Pine. "D'you think—d'you think——"

"Shut up, Tom Pine!" laughed Gaston. "Of course he thinks that! We're Taggart's men, you know, Tom Pine," he continued with a wink. "Of course, of course."

"All I know," said Hale, "is that I was standing at the peak of the road——"

"With a pair of field-glasses to your eyes."

"With a pair of field-glasses in my hand," corrected Hale, "and two shots came from off in the timber there to the right. The first knocked the glasses out of my hand. The second hit me in the leg. Apparently they didn't want to kill me, or——"

"They'd have plugged you through the head first clip. Sure. But what were you doing there with the glasses?"

"Thorson," said Hale wearily, "I'll never forget what you've done for me, and I'll even it up with you if I ever can. I'm helpless now, so I've got to ask one more favour from you. My rig is tied up down the road about a mile. Will you get it up here for me so I can get back to town?"

"Go get his rig, Tom," snapped Gaston. "He'll be fit to move by the time you're back."

"I'd better leave the bottle," said Tom, "in case——"

"Leave nothing! He's a good guy. Liquor—that's for toughs like us. Go get the team."

When Tom Pine had hurried down the road Gaston settled back on his heels, glaring at Hale. Hale returned his look steadily except when pain and weakness forced him to close his eyes. Gaston rose in

exasperation and began to tramp to and fro. Presently he stopped before the wounded man.

"Hale," he said, "don't you think I'm a white man?"

Hale made no reply. Gaston's great neck swelled with anger, but astonishment held him speechless. This was something new, something different. His life had been rough and varied, but no man yet had had cause to question for a moment that he was white.

"You mean to say you don't think I'm square?" he demanded in amazement.

Hale cleared his throat as if about to make a long speech, then seemed to change his mind.

"You ought to be a square man, by the eye of you," he said, "but you're Taggart's man——"

"Tom Pine!" bellowed Gaston, hurling himself out of hearing. "Hurry up with that rig!"

Tom soon appeared, appreciatively holding the reins over a pair of thin-legged drivers.

"He's got a good eye for a horse, even if he don't use liquor, this guy has, Gaston Olaf. I'll bet this pair'd step close to three minutes."

"Swing 'em around. Point 'em back toward town. Get out. Help me load him."

Gaston barked his commands savagely, and Tom Pine, looking at him, noted the iron set of the jaw, the clouded brows, and swore in amazement.

"I believe you're mad, Gaston Olaf," said Tom. "Yes, sir; something has got you mad like other folks at last."

"Shut up!"

They loaded Hale, handling him carefully, and tucked the lap-robes closely around him. He was white and sagging by this time, but he reached gamely out for the reins.

"Hell's fire and six-bits!" roared Tom Pine. "He thinks we'd leave him to get back alone!"

"Get in."

Gaston's command was quiet and as firm as iron. Hale's eyes widened in surprise as they mounted one on each side of him, holding him comfortably and warmly between them.

"Giddap!" said Gaston, and the drive back to Havens Falls was begun.

Gaston Olaf sat silent, staring straight before him, as the team jogged steadily onward, mile after mile. It was an unusual thing for him to do. He, always terrifically, explosively alive, was not wont to fail in appreciation of the delights of a sunny, keen March day, a tote-road with just enough snow remaining to make good sleighing, and a team of drivers which, trotting rump to rump, whisked the cutter along with scarcely a jerk or jar. But to-day no laughter, no running comment on scenes along the road, no bellowed venting of the unsuppressible joy of living. Gaston sat sour and glum.

He was not angry. He was shocked; he was dumfounded. Some one actually had questioned whether he, Gaston Olaf François Thorson, was a square man! His courage, his strength, his skill in the woods or daring on the river—any or all of these a man might have questioned and he would have laughed. But this—this was different. For a man's squareness, as Gaston understood it, was the foundation of a man's whole life. If the foundation was rotten the man was rotten. And if a man was rotten, he belonged, not among the people who held their heads up and looked the world in the eye, but among people who slunk and squinted—among the Red Shirt Murphys and their ilk.

"You ought to be a square man, by the eye of you, but—you're Taggart's man!"

Quite true; Taggart's man, like Murphy and the other jail-birds. Birds of a feather. It was very

simple. And Gaston, who up to now had swaggered his way through life, self-assured and proud, caring not one whit for the opinion of any man, or woman, wondered in fear if she of the wonderful eyes, too, had put him down as a man who was not square.

"Shake 'em up, Tom!" he barked. "This man needs a doctor."

"Shake 'em up?" repeated Tom Pine. "What you been doing, boy, sleeping? We're almost in town."

"Then chase 'em along; they can stand a run for a short distance."

CHAPTER XII

TAGGART'S MAN NO LONGER

IT was noon when they whirled into town at a full trot and pulled up before Olson's Hotel. For the second time Gaston took Hale in his arms and bore him up to his room, and for a second time Dr. Sanders came up the steps two at a time.

"It'll never do, Hale, never do at all," rattled the doctor. "This habit of getting bunged up is growing on you too rapidly. Arm yesterday, leg to-day. Bad, bad habit. Next thing you know you'll break your luck. Then where'll you be at? Hullo! Thirty-thirty calibre did that. Clean as a whistle. Flesh wound. No bones touched. Have to keep you in bed a few days, though; break you of habit of getting busted and shot up.

"Hot water, Hulda, thou potential mother of Vikings. What? Going right away, Thorson? Not back to the bush right away? See you in the back room in a few minutes."

Gaston was going down the stairs as the last words came shouted after him. He was not interested in Hale's leg or the doctor's cheerful conversation. He had serious personal business in hand; and so without waste of time he marched up the street, turned past the post-office, strode up the walk to the front door of the Havens' home, and knocked.

He heard a faint clatter of dishes within, then, like the tinkle of the silver bell of the church at Saint Madeline, came her voice—

"Come in!"

Gaston did not obey.

"Come in!"

Still Gaston did not enter.

"Well! Who can that be?" he heard her say; heard her rise from the table; then the sound of her tiny feet tripping lightly toward him.

"Why don't you come—oh!"

She flung open the door and started as she saw him. She was wearing a long apron, and her sleeves were rolled up over tiny, dimpled arms. Her hair was in disarray, and her face was reddened as if from the preparation of a meal. She was startled, even shocked, to see him standing there, grim-faced, his cap in his hands; but her hands went instantly to her head to put back straying brown locks. And then she laughed, for he was so very glum and serious in contrast to his swaggering manner of the night before.

"Why—why didn't you come in?" she said. "Didn't you hear me call?"

"Yes; but you didn't know who it was. I didn't know if I'd be welcome."

"Oh! How different!" She smiled mischievously. "I didn't know that you usually hesitated to discover if you were welcome or not."

"Rosebud!" came reprovingly from within. "Is that nice? Who is it? Has he had dinner?"

"No, mother; he hasn't—You look hungry, you know, Mr. Thorson—Get another plate, mother dear. He's going to eat with us."

"Are you willing to have the brute——"

"Now, don't bring that up, Mr. Thorson. I felt sorry the second after I'd said it. I only said it because I was angry. But it isn't nice of you to remind me that I was a pig."

"Miss Havens," said Gaston doggedly, "I came up

here to ask you one question: Do you think I'm a square man?"

"Of course!" Her reply came spontaneously. "But"—she grew quickly serious and thoughtful—"I also think you are the wildest, most reckless, most foolish boy I've ever seen."

"But," he insisted, "don't you think I'm one of Taggart's men?"

She shook her head slowly, the while looking him searchingly in the eyes.

"You couldn't be—one of those, could you?"

"Why couldn't I?"

"No." She shook her head again. "No, you couldn't be, because—because you couldn't. You—you don't belong with that kind. You know you don't."

"Where do you think I do belong?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I suppose people have to decide that for themselves." Her gaze roved over him and went to the floor. "But you—I believe you could do anything fine—no matter what—that you really wanted to. What can you see in the rough life you're leading, roaming around, fighting, a man like you? It's so boyish. What does it amount to? And there are so many real things, worth-while things, calling for men like you to do—especially in a country to be hewed out of the woods, like this. Things that only men like you can do.

"I should think you'd want to be doing something. I know I would if I were a man. It thrills me. Here are men breaking Nature for the use of men. I love it! I—oh, come to the table; I'm forgetting. Come. Mother dear," she called, leading the way into another room, "this is Mr. Thorson."

"Yes," said the little old lady at the table. "Sit right down here, Mr. Thorson, and help yourself. I'm

glad of the chance to thank you for taking care of my Rosebud yesterday morning. If we had a few men like you, Mr. Thorson, I'm thinking such things wouldn't happen much longer in Havens Falls. As it is, I often think we shall have to move away."

"We won't," said Rose vehemently. "They sha'n't scare us out. It's our home, and I love it—and we're going to stay. Sugar, Mr. Thorson?"

Gaston went through the meal in a sort of haze. It had been a long time since he had sat down to such a table in such a room, and in such company. A snow-white table-cloth; tiny, fragile dishes; the gentle little white-haired lady at the head of the table, and the girl, with sleeves rolled up over dimpled arms, urging him to eat.

In the windows were plants; a tall clock ticked cozily in a corner. Gaston was out of place. He was uncomfortable. Yet he sensed the permanence, the security, the comfort of the place. It was a home. And once more Gaston Olaf hungered wistfully for something, something for which a craving had been bred in him, and which his rough mode of life denied him.

He finished his meal as quickly as possible without being rude. He knew he was out of place there, did not belong, had no right. These things were not for him. Not now, at least, whispered something in him.

"Will you shake hands with me, Mrs. Havens?" he said as he rose to go.

"Why—why, of course!" The little silvery-haired lady took his big hand in astonishment. "What a queer boy you are!"

"Thanks," said Gaston. "I feel a lot better than when I came in here."

"Aha! A recommendation for my cooking!" cried Rose.

"I didn't mean that——"

"Aho! You didn't, eh? You mean to say my cooking isn't calculated to make any one feel better. Oh, very well."

"Rose, dear!" protested the mother.

"I mean, a man might get grub a lot of places to make him feel better," said Gaston, "but——"

His sweeping gesture indicated the girl, the mother, the room and all, better than words could have done.

"How pretty!" cried Rose. "That was French—*très gallant, m'sieu.* Imagine a man named Thorson doing that, mother."

"Rose, dear," chided the mother. "But 'Thorson' isn't a French name, Mr. Thorson?"

"My full name," said Gaston, "is Gaston Olaf François Thorson. Gaston François from my French mother; Olaf Thorson from my father, Norwegian. But I'm American. Don't forget that."

"'Olaf Thorson,'" repeated Rose. "My, what a sturdy, steady-going dependable sort of name it is with the 'Gaston François' left out."

"It's hard to leave it out, though," he replied; "they're all so closely mingled. And I guess I'm well named," he concluded with a laugh. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

He was at the door when the old lady called after him:

"I forgot to ask—are you really working for Taggart, and—helping him—Mr. Thorson?"

"No, ma'am," laughed Gaston. "I certainly am not. No matter what things may look like—I'm not working for Taggart."

CHAPTER XIII

THE CROOK TRAIL EXPOSED

"WHAT ho, Big Fellow!" greeted Dr. Sanders, as Gaston entered his private sanctum. "Help yourself to the poison there. Now, Tom, where does that road go from the swamp?"

"Keep on, north, Doc, to the crick—like this."

Tom Pine was following with a hardened forefinger a line on the map over which he and the doctor were poring. Gaston joined them without accepting the invitation regarding the poison.

The map was a large, carefully drawn affair of the country about Havens Falls, apparently the work of a skilled engineer and observer who had painstakingly cruised the district on foot and knew every square mile of the country which he mapped. The town-site of Havens Falls, neatly plotted on the bend of the river, was in the centre. A footnote concerning it read:

"Site ideal; high; solid; no danger from floods. Drinking water excellent; water power of falls capable of great development."

Of the great tamarack swamp to the north was noted:

"10,000 acres, first-class farm land when burnt over and ditched."

Along the river were several notes:

"Good deposits of brick clay." There were ridges marked: "Some trace of iron," or "bare, glacial,

moraine." In other places were "white pine," "Norway," "hardwood." Some valleys were marked, "red clay," others, "black loam."

Rivers were labelled with their drop per mile, lakes by their depth. The Big LaCroix River at intervals was marked, "Good mill site." One of these at the mouth of a bayou attracted Gaston's attention. His eyes lighted with appreciation as he studied the map. A woodsman had but to look at it and the whole country around was spread out before him as in a panorama.

Tom Pine's forefinger was tracing the line of the road up the river, as they had travelled it the night before.

"Here's where we leave the marsh, Doc, and go up into the timber, jest like it is here. Here's where we pass them clearings, jest where they're marked. Then we keep on. Pretty soon we come to this big ridge here. Then we go up over that and down to the crick at the bottom, and——"

"That's where the road stops on the map." The doctor was visibly excited.

"I see it does," continued Tom imperturbably. "But we didn't stop there. We went across the crick and swung west——"

"West? West? Are you sure it wasn't east, Tom? Thorson, did you swing west?"

Gaston nodded.

"It couldn't have been east. We'd have had to cross the LaCroix to do that. We went west, along the far side of that branch."

Dr. Sanders swung around, poured himself a drink, tossed it off and swung back again.

"By the claws of Old Nicky! Hm, hm! West—along the far side of that crick! Are you sure, boys? It was dark, you know. Are you sure you've got it

right? Yes, yes. I'm afraid you have. Well, where then, Tom?"

"Then we kept on along the crick for some distance, until we come to the lake that the crick runs out of, and then we swung along the lake—what in Sam Hill, Doc? What for have you got that corner turned down over the lake like that? You're hiding the spot where that camp is at."

Dr. Sanders suddenly whisked the map off the table and rolled it up. Then he sat down heavily.

"Boys, this looks like the devil," he said solemnly.

"What does?" said Gaston.

The doctor smote the map.

"You notice I've got that lake covered," he said. "I'm afraid to follow your trail to the finish, alone. I may be wrong; I may be reading the map wrong. The man who made the map is the one to lift that corner off the lake. Boys, I don't know if you realise what this means. I'm asking you as a favour: will you come with me and tell all this to the man who made this map?"

"Certainly," replied Gaston. "Where is he?"

"In bed in his room over at Olson's."

"Hale?"

"Hale—Dick Hale."

"I thought Hale was just a teetotaler of a storekeeper?"

"He's that, too. But he's a civil engineer and a geologist, and a whole lot of other things, too. He made that map. He's probably the only man in the world who could make it. Not even old Taggart has mushed over this country like Hale has. And that's why he's the man who's got to lift the corner of this map."

"All right." Gaston nodded grimly. "We'll go over and repeat to him what we've told you. But first I

want to ask you a question, Dr. Sanders: Do you think I'm a square man?"

Dr. Sanders' jaw dropped in amazement. He stared at Gaston, and finally broke out into laughter.

"Do I think you're square? Of course! What are you driving at, Thorson?"

"Hale doesn't," said Gaston.

"Hm, hm! Hale doesn't, eh? Well, Hale, mighty cautious fellow—quiet, calm, judicial-minded—judges things and men with the acid test. You've got to show him. That's Hale. Understand?"

"He's got me judged as Taggart's man."

"We-ell—I told you you'd be sorry about that, didn't I? Couldn't blame people for putting you among the bad ones when you choose to run with 'em. How can people judge except by actions, 'specially a stranger's? And Dick Hale, you know, hasn't had the pleasure of talking to you over the bottle—couldn't possibly know you as I do, you know. And until he knows, that boy doesn't warm up."

"Do you think I'm one of Taggart's men?"

"Sixteen long-tailed devils! What are you talking about? Haven't I asked you to liquor with me after you've been in Taggart's camp? D'you think I'd do that if I didn't know you were white?"

"And the other people—square people—around here. What do they think?"

"We-ell." Dr. Sanders stroked his beard. "I told you you'd be sorry for running with that pack of scum."

"Not a —— bit." Gaston's mouth was grim and hard. "Glad I did it. Just the thing."

"But what's happened to you, Thorson? You—you caring about what people think of you! Whoa, ho! Getting soft, young Viking? Civilisation taking the iron out of you, too? I never thought this of you."

"Neither did I," said Gaston. "Because until this morning I never thought any one'd ever have reason for doubting that I was white."

"Hm, hm! Old boy, pardon me, but if you'll let me diagnose your case, I guess you never stopped to think much at all about anything, did you?"

"I guess that's right, too."

"No more than a storm. You just naturally tore along and tore things up, and tore on again."

Gaston nodded.

"And why should a raging, blowing storm bother about people's opinions?" laughed the doctor.

Gaston scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"Well, Doc, I guess it's because a man feels sometimes he can't keep on storming all his life."

"Hm, hm! Perhaps. But, come on; let's storm over and see the man who made this map."

He led the way across to the hotel, went up the stairs two at a time, complimented Hulda on the size of the forearms she displayed as she held a cooling drink to Hale's lips, and felt the wounded man's pulse, all at top speed and chattering constantly.

"Hm, hm! Got some fever, old dog! Going to have some more. Got some news here calculated to make your temperature rise, but it won't wait. Don't let it make you boil if you can help it, old man. Hulda, your wholesome presence in the room usually is worth a dozen doctors, but just hie your airy, fairy little form hence for the present. Get out; skedaddle; mooch!"

Hulda chuckled far down in her deep bosom as she moved toward the door.

"You are offul frash sometime, Doctor," she said. "If I didn't like you so much I skud smeck you one."

"Ha! What? Hm, hm!" The doctor waited until the door had closed on her and unrolled the map.

"Follow the trail over again, boys," he said briskly. "Tell Hale here just what you told me. And, Hale, you were wrong; Thorson isn't Taggart's man. Now shoot, boys."

Gaston described the course of the road they had travelled in taking the crew into camp. As his finger followed the road along the West Branch, Hale suddenly turned up the folded corner of the map and revealed the lake which he had drawn as it lay at the head of the creek. There was no surprise on Hale's face as Gaston's finger ran along the shore to the location of Taggart's new camp.

"I thought so, but I wasn't quite sure," said he. "That's why I went out to the big ridge this morning. You can look over to Loon Lake—that's what that lake is—from the big ridge with glasses. That's what I was preparing to do when they shot me. Read what's written there where you're holding your finger."

Gaston bent over and read aloud:

"'Clear growth white pine. Owned by Rose Havens.'"

"Then it's so?" cried Dr. Sanders. "Devil Dave Taggart——"

"Yes, he's stealing Miss Havens's timber," said Hale.

"Hell's fire and six-bits!" roared Tom Pine. "I knew we hadn't any business there."

Gaston stood silently looking down at the map. His face was granite hard, and the light of recklessness was missing. He lifted his eyes and looked first at the doctor then at Hale.

"And I'm the man who got that crew up there in time to do the job," he said quietly. "Taggart fooled me. He was too smart for me. And I was too hot-headed to listen to you, Doc; too hot-headed to think."

CHAPTER XIV

TAGGART'S SYSTEM

FOR a space there was silence in the room. Then the doctor's voice, incredulously:

"Oh, my stars! Robbing a girl, alone with her mother! The grinding old devil! Has he got the nerve, the heart, to do a thing like this? Hm, hm! Of course. Nerve and heart to do anything. Devil Dave has. But this—this is beyond the limit."

"I was afraid he'd do it," said Hale. "That bunch of pine always was a thorn in his side. It was the one valuable piece of timber that old Havens managed to hang on to, to leave to his daughter when he died. Taggart had managed to freeze, or swindle, or buy him out of everything else except that and Mrs. Havens's homestead quarter section here in town.

"Taggart's point of view is that this country belongs to him. It angered him to think that some one else possessed the best piece of timber around here. He tried to buy before Havens was buried. As executor and agent I had to deal with him. He said: 'Sell to me for five thousand dollars, or you'll never log a foot of that pine.'

"I told him twenty-five thousand would be nearer a fair price. 'But five thousand is better than nothing,' he said. I asked him what he meant. He said: 'Nobody touches that timber but myself. Try to log it and see. You've got just this Winter to log it in, too, because if it isn't mine by next August dry spell a fire'll go through it that won't leave anything stand-

ing but stumps.' We tried to log it this Winter. We couldn't even get men to go up and clear space for a camp. I've got a small sawmill outfit here. I can't get men to set it up. Taggart warned them—that was enough. Our hands were tied.

"I knew Taggart never intended to send that timber up in smoke. Not that he'd have any compunction about it, but he's too avaricious. He's been in a cold rage ever since the sale was refused him. His men began to make things rougher in the settlement at once. Then this new crew came in. I suspected something then. When I heard it given out that a new camp was to be started within eight miles of town I knew something was wrong, because there isn't any pinery that near town that hasn't one of Taggart's camps in it.

"The men got drunk and got out of hand. Murphy got drunk, too, and lost his grip on them. He tried to start them for camp the second day. They laughed at him. Murphy was done for. He'd never have got them out.

"I began to hope the crew would go to pieces, and it would be too late to get another together in time to get much logging done before Spring. Taggart didn't have another man who could handle that crew. He could have done it himself, but that isn't Taggart's way. He has others do his dirty work for him."

"And that was me," interjected Gaston bitterly. "I came along, and Taggart fooled me into becoming his tool."

"This morning I hooked up and took a drive, following the tracks of the sleighs," continued Hale. "I guess they'd expected maybe I'd do something of the sort. Maybe some one noticed me leaving town; Taggart's Indian can run faster than a horse can travel. Well, we found out, anyhow, thanks to you fellows.

Taggart's started to rob the Havens of everything they possess."

"Hah? Everything? What do you mean?" cried Dr. Sanders.

"There's five thousand dollars mortgage against that timber, secured by Mrs. Havens's homestead," said Hale. "The mortgage is held by the bank down at La Croix."

"Well? What of it?"

"If Taggart succeeds in his steal there'll be no lumber, no money, and the mortgage on the homestead will be foreclosed."

The doctor laughed in desperation.

"Hm, hm. Cunning little Devil David! How like the man! Puts you between the devil and the deep sea, and he's both of 'em. Hm, hm. Octopus, devil-fish. Very complicated. This needs thinking about."

"Thinking ——!" said Tom Pine. "Ain't these women got any men-folk of their own?"

"They have not."

"Well"—it was a very simple matter to Tom, and he spoke matter of fact—"they's four of us here. Since these women ain't got no men-folk of their own, we got to stand by 'em and see they ain't done wrong. So we just draw lots, the four of us, to see who puts a bullet through old Taggart's head or makes him quit."

To Tom's surprise his suggestion was received without any enthusiasm. Even Gaston Olaf shook his head.

"Those good old days are gone, Tom Pine—here, anyway," he said.

"Why be they?" demanded Tom. "He's doing lone women dirt, ain't he? Why shouldn't somebody get him?"

"Because things have changed, old fire-eater!" re-

plied Dr. Sanders with a tinge of regret in his voice. "The old order passeth; law and order taketh its place —at least let's hope so."

"Law and order!" snorted Tom Pine. "Well, I never felt comf'table where they was too much of that around. Out in the woods no hairy old wolf like Taggart could sneak the grub-bag away from a couple of lone women, if they was any men around, without getting a lung blowed out of him, and you know it. And just because he knew that'd happen to him he wouldn't go try it. Here—'law and order' you sez; 'things has changed.' Well, I should say they has! Gaston—Gaston Olaf—I believe you've changed, too."

Gaston did not reply. He realised the impossibility of making Tom Pine see things as he saw them now, since he had sat at table with Rose Havens and her mother in their home. He had not changed. Men do not change so suddenly, so radically, so dramatically. But in some men a portion of their true self long lies dormant, awaiting the crisis of circumstances to bring it into active control of their personality.

Gaston had not changed. He had lived only at the dictates of one side of his nature so far, the care-free, unthinking, reckless *coureur de bois* side of him, the side of him which made a laugh of life, which had kept his quick feet on the Restless Ones' trail with never a thought of to-morrow, never an idea of remaining any longer in one spot than was pleasant to his vagrant fancy. But back of him there was also a long strain of severe, sober-minded Norsemen, a breed which even in the days of its sea-robber glory held so stern a passion for the Home and the Law that peasants rose and sorrowfully slew their hero-kings who dared to transgress the Law or violate the Home. Wherefore Gaston Olaf, at the ordered, home-table of the Havens had hungered mightily; and wherefore

now he shook his head while Tom Pine uttered his lawless suggestion.

"You've got a sheriff in this county, haven't you?" he asked; and Tom Pine looked at him in disgust.

"A sheriff! Hell's fire and six-bits, Gaston Olaf! What's come over you?"

Hale smiled bitterly and looked at Sanders.

"Hm, hm! A sheriff? Oh, yes. Yes, yes; of course the county's got a sheriff," said the doctor. "He's down at La Croix. I think he—hm, hm—tends bar down there. Taggart keeps him, because sometimes he finds a sheriff handy to do his dirty work."

Gaston stood looking heavily at the floor for a long time.

"So that's the way it is," he muttered at last. "Then I guess 'Devil Dave's' got the drop, hasn't he? I take it you fellows here ain't got an idea that he can be stopped?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. Hale looked away.

"Have you?" insisted Gaston. "Get down to hard-pan—not what you hope, or expect, but the solid facts—have you got any idea of a way to stop Taggart from stealing this girl's timber?"

"Sure they have!" sneered Tom Pine. "The law—law'n order. They'll have the law on him, won't you, gents?"

"We will go to La Croix and take it into court, of course," said Hale.

"Which," said the doctor, "considering that Taggart owns the court, too, isn't much of a hopeful move."

"Not for immediate action," admitted Hale. "But the case will be on record. Taggart won't control the court much longer, if we manage to get the decent

element on top, as we hope to do. Then there will be opportunity for justice to be done."

"Talk! Nothing but talk. You can't lick Taggart with your mouth. While you're going to law Taggart will have the timber chopped down, the drive down the river, and the logs sold. He'll be stronger than ever; he'll be so strong that you fellows won't dare to make a chirp. Can't you see what this is? It's his notice to you fellows to pack up and travel. It's his way of letting you know that this country is his and that he'll do just as he pleases, take what he pleases, and the law can't touch him. No, that won't do. If he isn't licked on this job, you'll never lick him. And you can't do it, can you?"

"I don't see how we can," admitted Hale.

"Neither do I. You aren't the kind of fellows to lick one of the old breed like Taggart. That ain't saying anything against you; you're good men in town. But Taggart's an old wolf of the woods. It'll take one of his own kind to have a chance against him. You can't get an old wolf's scalp if he knows you're hunting him."

Gaston's lids were narrowed to mere slits, and his eyes were peering out of the window with a far-away, wistful look in the blue of them.

"Boys, are you satisfied now that I'm a white man? All right. Then that's understood; so no matter what happens you'll know it's—square. No matter what. The man who beats an old wolf like Taggart has got to make funny-looking trails. All right."

He moved briskly toward the door.

"There's no use saying anything to the girl about what Taggart's at. No use worrying her before it's necessary. There's only the four of us who know We'll keep it so, eh?"

Hale nodded.

"Hm, hm. Got something up your sleeve, Thorson?" asked the doctor.

Gaston thrust out his long arm, stiff and hard as an iron bar.

"Sure!" he laughed. "Take a feel of that."

CHAPTER XV

GASTON HAS A SCHEME

ON the long wooden bench beside the door of Mrs. Olson's hostelry Gaston Olaf seated himself in the sun, pulled his cap far down over his eyes, and sat staring apparently at the rubbers on his feet. Tom Pine, as was his wont, seated himself at Gaston's side, bit off a chew, spat into the snow, and waited.

He knew these moods, did Tom Pine. They came at regular intervals and contrasted strangely with the buoyant scheme of life as normally pursued by Gaston Olaf. While in their grasp Gaston's boyish laughter was stilled. The impulse to be up and going, to be playing, to be blowing off steam in some wild fashion, was dead or dormant for the time being. Gaston, on such occasions, sat by himself, serious of mien, wanting to be left alone.

"He's Norwegian to-day," said Tom Pine on such days, and waited patiently for the mood to pass.

Despite Gaston's incredible weakness in suggesting an appeal to a sheriff, Tom sat contentedly by his side, placidly chewing, holding his peace, waiting. It was pleasant enough there in the sun, and Tom knew that Gaston's thoughts were working in a fashion that presaged immediate action.

When Gaston roused himself he did it slowly, heavily, in contrast to his usual lightning-like movements. He drew his long legs up slowly, straightened his shoulders, and pushed back his cap.

"Tom," he drawled, "we got to get back in that camp."

"All right," agreed Tom. He realised that it was no time to differ with Gaston now. "It's a rotten place for a white man to be, but I 'spect you got an idee?"

Gaston nodded.

"We got to get back in good standing. We've got to be Taggart's men again. To do that you got to get good and drunk."

Tom Pine's mouth and eyes opened wide with amazement.

"Get drunk? You mean it, Gaston Olaf?" A smile wreathed his lips. "Well, if I gotto do it, I s'pose——"

Gaston rose with him.

"What! You're going to get drunk, too, Gaston Olaf?"

"Not much. You see, it's this way, Tom: you suddenly discovered you had to have liquor this morning. So you streaked it for town. I took after you, to bring you back. You're drunk now, understand, and I'm just drinking with you to keep you in good humour, so you'll come back to camp peaceful. Understand?"

Tom stared and blinked, and a look of admiration spread over his countenance.

"You old son of a gun!" he breathed in awe.

Suddenly he lurched into the street, threw his cap in the snow and leaped on it.

"Wow!" he bellowed. "Turn me loose! Nobody gets me back to camp till I've drinked this settlement dry. Wow! Come on, boys! Let 'er roar!"

So they proceeded to "let 'er roar" a little in the good old fashion of the bad, old river towns. They surged together through the door of the nearest saloon.

They leaned against the bar upon which Tom Pine's mallet-like fists beat in a fierce tattoo.

"Licker! Licker! Licker!" The voice of Tom was strident and drunken. "Whoop-la! Out with your poison! Let it come hot an' quick. I'm off the res'vation, and they ain't no foreman going to get me to camp till the last drink's drinked. Money? Come outside an' take it out of my hide like a man."

Tom drank and surged out again, while Gaston paid and hurried after.

"Give the boys something. Give 'em all something. Belly up, boys. 'S on me, an' any man refuses to drink with me's got to put me on my back."

They were in another place now, and Tom Pine was more belligerent than ever.

"Come on; let's go back to camp," insisted Gaston loudly. "You've had enough."

"Enough?" The liquor had really begun to work in Tom's veins, and he was drolly conscious that he was only half acting. "Enough? For me? Huh! Got to make the rounds first."

So they made the rounds, swinging through one saloon door after another, drinking sometimes, sometimes skilfully quarrelling and leaving before the drinks were ordered. In Jack McCarthy's place they saw Charley, the Indian, in a corner, and there they came so close to blows, apparently, that they parted company, Tom to fume over his liquor at one end of the bar while Gaston drank a small glass of beer with McCarthy at the other end. The Indian slipped out unobserved.

"S'prised to see you back in town so soon," offered McCarthy tentatively. "Anything go wrong out at camp?"

"Nothing but that thing there," replied Gaston, with a disgusted nod at Tom. "He's a corker, that little

partner of mine is. Wouldn't drink anything to speak of yesterday when we were in town. But this morning, just as the work got started, the thirst hit him. Nothing to do with him then except throw him down and tie him up. I happened to be away from camp a few minutes, and when I came back he was gone.

"He's my partner, you know, and he gets bad if he gets on a bat all alone. I just naturally had to come after him, trying to catch him before he hit town. He'd come across this Hale with a hole in his leg before I caught him. He wouldn't go back then—too good a chance to get a ride to town. Well, he's my partner. I had to come along to watch him; but I'll have him back in camp to-night or break his little back."

McCarthy winked and lowered his voice.

"No need to do that. Any time you're ready to start we'll slip a few drops o' medicine into his drink and he'll go to sleep like a little babe."

"We'll try it later, maybe. He's bound to make the rounds. When he's through mebbe he'll listen to reason."

From McCarthy's the way led back toward the hotel. At each step Tom grew more vociferous, and a crowd began to follow along. In the last place the little man called himself content and willing to start back to camp; so out they came tumbling, arm in arm, and lurched down to the stables. There the stableman, laughing at Tom's efforts to help him, hooked up a light team, and the drive to camp was begun.

In the tamarack swamp, two miles out, they met Taggart, with Charley, the Indian, in the cutter beside him. Gaston saw that the latter was wet with perspiration and knew that he had run out from McCarthy's to meet his employer.

Taggart was thoroughly sober now. He sat sunk

down in the cutter, his chin on his chest, his eyes cold, elusive. He did not pull up as the sleighs swung out to pass in the narrow road. He did not even look up.

"You'll never go far with such a partner, Thorson," he whined as he whisked past.

Gaston gave a great sigh of relief. Indian Charley apparently had repeated the tale Gaston had spun for his benefit in McCarthy's and Taggart had accepted it, never crediting Gaston and Tom with subtleness enough for guile. That danger was past.

"And now," thought Gaston, "we'll see if a young wolf can out-fox an old one."

CHAPTER XVI

TOM PINE IS PUZZLED

IN the next two weeks Gaston Olaf satisfied Taggart that his judgment of the young man had not been amiss. As a man-driver and company bully of a rotten hell-camp, Gaston proved himself well up to the difficult Taggart standard. Murphy, the camp-boss, laid out the work; Gaston flung the men at it.

Sometime in his career Murphy undoubtedly had learned the logging business under masters of the craft. His skill in directing the work so that the logs went rolling out on the ice of the lake with the least confusion, marked him for an expert logger. As a handler of men he was hopeless, the men reading the constant fear in his eyes and laughing at him when he attempted mastery.

They did not laugh at Gaston. He had set his foot too firmly on their necks in the beginning. When he shouted they jumped, and he shouted often. His manner was changed. He laughed but seldom, and a certain fierce grimness had taken the place of his old recklessness. Often he paced to and fro behind a crew, hands behind his back, head thrust forward, apparently oblivious of their presence. But let them slacken a moment in their work and:

"Hi! Wake up, you rats! Want me to put the corks to you?"

No crew of true lumberjacks—the cockiest type of worker in the world—would have stood his driving for

one day, and not for a minute would Gaston have attempted to drive them so.

But these were not true lumberjacks. They were beaten, broken men, or men with a price on their heads, who knew they were safe only under Taggart's protection.

At rare intervals one of them, the strength coming back to his heart and muscles through enforced abstinence and hard labour, ventured to grumble. And then the others looked at him after Gaston had dealt punishment and bent their backs lower in toil.

At times Gaston went away by himself. Tom Pine saw him sometimes at a distance, tramping feverishly up and down between the pines, his hands clenched behind his back, head forward, eyes on the ground. Sometimes at night he was seen so. He did not sleep well. Tom Pine, attempting to chaff him out of the mood, was rebuffed.

"Dry up. Can't you ever get over talking and thinking like a boy?" Gaston was very curt. "Boy's talk! Silly nonsense! What kind of talk is that for grown men to have in their mouths?"

Tom Pine did not understand. Here were he and Gaston Olaf bent on saving this pine for that girl down in Havens Falls, and yet here was Gaston Olaf doing his best to get the pine down in a hurry, doing his best, apparently, to serve Taggart's ends. For under Gaston's dynamic driving the crew of bums was rivalling in its daily output that of a crew of real lumberjacks.

Each day the dark carpet of logs spread farther out over the white Winter covering of the lake. Each day the clearing grew larger, the number of pines standing were fewer.

"Gaston Olaf," Tom burst out testily one morning as he noted how the cut was growing, "I know you

ain't no Swede, and I don't go for to call you one, but I do put it up to you that you certainly don't seem to be showing no more brains than if you was one."

"So?" Gaston did not laugh, but merely stood and waited for Tom to explain.

"You bet. Here we're out to help these lone women folk save their pine, and instead of doing it, here you're driving hell-bent-for-election to get the stuff down—playing right in Taggart's hands."

"Yes?"

"Well, ain't you?"

"Am I?"

Tom Pine swung away in disgust.

"Hell's-fire-and-six-bits! I'm your partner; you got a right to let me know your scheme, but I'll be —— if I ask you what it is."

Gaston made no reply. But as the cut grew larger, he grew more and more moody, walked more by himself, and grew troubled about the eyes. To hide these signs he drove the men harder and harder.

One Saturday morning Gaston came down to the stable where Tom was bringing out his team, and Tom, looking at him by the light of a lantern, saw that the troubled look was gone from Gaston's eyes and that he almost smiled.

"Tom Pine," he said with just a touch of the old manner, "I think it is time for you to break loose again."

"Hah?"

"The time has come, Tom Pine, for the thirst to hit you, hard and sudden. You're going to sneak off and quit. You're going to hit town and let 'er roar a little. Is that plain?"

"Plain as a bird's flight to a blind man, Gaston Olaf. What'n'ell you driving at?"

Gaston made sure that they were quite alone.

"I want to see that man, Hale, and you've got to be the go-between. So you quit, and go and stay in town. You tell Hale I want to see him down by the Big Bayou on the La Croix to-morrow night, Sunday, at that bayou he's got marked as a good mill-site on that map of his, you know. Tell him to slip away on the quiet and be there about eight o'clock. Tell him it's just the three of us to know about it."

"All right, Gaston Olaf. Now you go on and tell me what scheme you got."

Gaston shook his head, his jaw set forbiddingly.

"Don't talk like a boy. This is no time for such stuff. Do what you're told and don't talk about it. I want to see Hale at Big Bayou to-morrow night at eight. And don't act like a kid when you get to town, and get drunk and blab all you know."

Tom Pine looked wonderingly after Gaston as the latter strode away toward where the men were beginning work.

"That's a —— of a way to treat a pardner," mused the little man, "but I know you, Gaston Olaf, I know you like a book, and I suspect you've figgered out a big scheme, and I'd be a poor pardner if I didn't obey your orders and quit this beautiful job and go to town and let 'er roar."

Tom did not travel the tote-road when, soon after this, he slipped away unobserved. The craft and guile of the old woodser was Tom's, and he had no notion of risking himself in the vicinity of the old camp building on the creek.

"If I did, that rifle artist might see me, and then I might not be able to let 'er roar according to Gaston Olaf's orders."

So he swung far into the timber away from the creek, circled the big ridge, and made his trail toward Havens Falls run parallel to the tote-road but half a

mile to one side. However, half-way to town, his curiosity overcame him. The Big Bayou on the La Croix, where Gaston had appointed his rendezvous with Hale, was constantly in his mind.

What did the bayou have to do with it? Was it possible that a man might get a hint of Gaston's scheme by taking a look at the bayou?

Tom paused, took his bearings and saw that he was about six miles from town, which was just the distance at which the bayou was marked on Hale's map.

"And it ain't more'n three-quarters of a mile over to the La Croix," mused Tom. "I'll step over and take a look."

He found the bayou with little trouble. It was practically a long, narrow lake, lying parallel to the river and separated from it only by a narrow spine of earth perhaps twenty feet high and ten feet wide. The lower end of the bayou was connected with the river by a narrow opening in the bank, through which the river overflowed in high water. The river along the bayou was narrow and punctuated here and there by jagged black rocks which jutted up above the soft grey ice.

"A hard place to take a drive through," said Tom, studying the scene with knowing eyes, "and that fellow Hale is right about that bayou making a sweet log-pond if they was a mill on it. But what'n'ell has that got to do with getting the start of old Taggart?"

He puzzled his grey head over the problem in vain.

"But Gaston Olaf, he sees," he concluded, as he turned away; and confident of his leader's scheme, though ignorant of what it was, he swung back away from the river and went on his way to town.

He did not seek out Hale immediately upon his arrival in the settlement. He first let 'er roar a little to let people know that he was in town and on a bat.

When he had sufficiently advertised this fact he lurched up to Dr. Sanders's office.

"What ho! Drunk again, eh?" greeted the doctor. "Have one with me."

"Look again, Doc," said Tom. "Do I look drunk now?"

Dr. Sanders whistled.

"You certainly looked drunk coming in. Drunk in the legs. Sober in the eye. What's the idea?"

"Where's Hale?"

"Sitting up in his room across the street."

"All right. Have me that drink ready, Doc. I'll be back to get it pretty quick."

He staggered so when he crossed the street that Hulda, meeting him on the stairway, made to bar his way.

"Message from Dr. Sanders to Mr. Hale," said Tom gruffly. "Doctor's business."

"Of, ef et's Dr. Sanders——"

Tom slipped by and found Hale in an armchair, busy with papers and books.

"Thorson says he wants to see you at the big bayou at eight to-morrow night, and tell nobody, and let nobody see you go," he said. "But how'n'ell are you going to make it if your leg's still bunged up?"

"Did Thorson send you in to tell me that?"

"He shore did."

"Then I'll be there," said Hale quietly, and turned to his papers.

CHAPTER XVII

"FOR ROSE HAVENS"

ON Sunday evening Gaston lay on a bed of balsam boughs on the spit of land separating the river from the Big Bayou, and with hands folded behind his head stared upward at the troubled April sky. And he smiled. For the sky to his knowing eye had lost the crispness of Winter.

The stars no longer gleamed with the cold glitter of points of brittle ice; in their gleam was a certain tinge of softness, as if the Winter crispness in them had thawed. The clouds that drove northward were not Winter clouds. Snow they contained, perhaps, but to Gaston their textures betrayed the fact that Winter had lost its stern grip on the heavens. The break-up was on its way.

In that northern country Winter reluctantly released its grip only after the calendar counted Spring a month old. But now the signs of the break-up were prominent, and Gaston smiled. For in the waning light of that afternoon he had gone over the Big Bayou and had made sure that his reading of Hale's map was correct, and that the Big Bayou was well fitted to further his scheme.

So now he lay at ease on his balsams waiting for Hale, and smiled at the sky, and thought of Rose.

A buck suddenly jumped from the dark timber on to the white strip of snow along the river, stood for an instant listening, snorted and like a shadow fled across

the ice of the river and disappeared in the darkness beyond.

"Something coming," thought Gaston. "That buck was scared."

Many minutes later he caught the sound of a wary footfall in the woods. The steps came nearer. A dark figure came slowly up the bank. Gaston waited until he saw the short, limping figure outlined against the white snow and called:

"All right, Hale. This way."

He lay stretched at ease in his comfortable position without moving, while Hale fumbled forward in the darkness. By this time he knew Hale well enough to expect that he would keep the appointment, still, at the sight of him limping along in the darkness, obviously out of place and helpless in the woods, Gaston was surprised.

Hale was a town man, and crippled at that, and the woods at night were no place for such, but here he was, coming along quietly, doggedly, as he did most things. Gaston felt one of his old impulses to slap the little man on the back, to cheer him, to call him the game little man that he was. But always with Hale there came thoughts of Rose. So Gaston lay without moving his hands from behind his head and said simply—

"How'd you come out?"

"Rode my little pony up the road, tied him in the brush, and walked over."

"Where's Taggart's Indian?"

"In town."

"Huh! Then I s'pose he trailed you out."

"Hardly. I started in the other direction—down toward La Croix. There is a decent element in La Croix, too. I go down there occasionally. We are trying to organise for the Spring election—to get a

decent sheriff if we can. Indian Charley saw me go, but he didn't follow."

"How do you know?"

"I stopped and back-tracked when I was a mile out of town. Then I circled back of the settlement and came up here."

"And I suppose you tied your nag on this side of the road?"

"No. On the other side. And I made tracks in the opposite direction for a short distance."

Gaston smiled.

"Hale, if I'd caught you young I believe I could have made a fair woodsman out of you." Suddenly he dropped his bantering tone. "How much dynamite can you lay your hands on in the next two weeks —before the break-up, say?"

"Dynamite? Oh, I've got a fairly large stock of that on hand, for stump-blasting."

"Do you notice how this narrow ridge we're laying on separates the river from the Big Bayou?"

"I've noticed it often."

"Almost like a dam-wall. Look at it close. If there was a gap blown in the upper end of the ridge there, at the head of the bayou, the river would swing into it considerably, wouldn't it?"

"Yes."

"And if the river channel was blocked right there where those rocks show, with the gap in this bank just above it, the whole current would swing into the bayou strong, wouldn't it?"

"Yes."

"All right. Can you lay hands on enough dynamite to shoot a gap in this bank?"

"How big a gap?"

"Twenty feet wide might do it—thirty would be better. We'll have to get our dynamite down low, level

with the river-bed. Put in say a dozen good shots a couple of feet apart. That would topple her over and the water would carry the dirt away."

Hale calculated for a moment.

"Yes, I can get plenty of dynamite for that."

"And a couple of dirt augers to do the boring with, and a couple of axes and peavies?"

"Yes."

"And two good heavy boom-chains, one about a hundred and fifty feet long, the other about seventy-five?"

"I can get all that stuff, Thorson. Now, will you tell me what it's all for?"

Gaston debated awhile.

"For Rose Havens," he said at last.

Hale looked at him, looked away up the river for a space, then put his hand to his wounded leg.

"I understand, Thorson," he said. "I—I guess I'd better be getting back to town. That's all you wanted to see me about, is it?"

Gaston rose.

"That's all. How about it now? I've turned my cards face up. Are you still willing to furnish me the stuff, and keep this all under cover?"

"Certainly." Hale was hobbling away. "When do you want it?"

"If you'll get it together and have it ready for me where I can get it when I want it, that'll be the ticket."

"All right."

Hale was in the timber. Suddenly Gaston's heart smote him.

"Hold on, old boy!" he cried. "Let me give you a hand to your horse."

"No—no, thanks, Thorson," said Hale promptly. "I—I'd rather go it alone if you don't mind."

Nevertheless Gaston followed him through the tim-

ber and saw he mounted his pony and was safely on his way to town. Then he turned and struck off by a roundabout way for Taggart's camp.

"Darn him!" he mused as he hurried along. "I never intended to even mention her, but he's so square I had to give him his warning."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SPRING BREAK-UP

THAT night it grew warmer. When the men tumbled out for work on Monday morning there was a softness in the air which had not been before. The snow was soft underfoot. In the forest tiny traces of moisture began to ooze between the bark and trunks of the trees, while out upon the white expanse of the snow-covered lake there began to appear dark spots of varying size.

Gaston cast eyes on the lake the first thing that morning. At the sight of the dark spots in the snow he ran quickly out for a closer view. When he came back there was a glimmer of the old battle-light in his eyes and his jaw was set with new grimness.

"The Spring-holes are breaking through, Murphy," he said to the camp boss. "You know what that means."

"Sure. Means the break-up's due in a couple weeks or so."

"It means more than that, Murphy. It means that the end of this job is in sight, because the drive starts the minute the ice starts running, and there'll be no logging here after that."

"Sure; that's what I said. Means we'll be out of here in a couple of weeks."

"It means that this bunch of bums will have to jump from this minute on, that's what it means," said Gaston. "It means that they'll have to hustle in a way to make sure that this job will be cut clean before the break-up comes."

Murphy shrugged his shoulders.

"I haven't got any orders like that. I guess the old man wouldn't holler if there should happen to be a few trees left standing when we duck out."

"Maybe not. Maybe Taggart wouldn't kick. But I"— Gaston smiled—"I certainly would kick myself if I didn't get out every pound of work there's in this crew before we quit. Understand, Murphy? I'm here to get every possible saw-log out of this crew of Taggart's. I'm out to set a record. This is going to be a job that will be camp-talk for years to come."

"You must want awful bad to get solid with the old man."

"You bet!" laughed Gaston. "I want to, long as I live."

He walked among the men that morning and told them frankly that he demanded a record.

"You've only got a couple weeks left to go, but for that time you've got to go like thunder. Make up your mind to that. There's no way of soldiering out of it; you know me. So grab hold and go after that record."

Tom Pine would have been puzzled still more had he been able to see Gaston's conduct for the next two weeks. He now seemed to have but one aim in life—for Taggart's crew to log the last of Rose Havens's white pines before the ice went out. If the work lagged for want of a strong back, a quick pair of hands, or a skilfully wielded axe, he leaped into the breach himself.

"He's crazy," growled Murphy, making his report to Taggart. "Why, when a team gets stuck skidding he grabs hold of the chain and pulls with 'em."

Taggart, who never permitted himself to be seen at the camp, nodded appreciatively at such reports.

"Exactly. That's the kind of men who have steam

in them, Murphy, men with no dread of the rope spoiling their sleep. Well, well. When I get a proper hold over Thorson I've no doubt he will be the most valuable fool I have on my pay-roll."

And Gaston Olaf continued to drive and heave and work like one possessed. Had Taggart been there to see with his deep-set little eyes he might have read in the young man's dynamic demand for results something more than a mere desire to make good on his first job. But Taggart did not see.

Taggart was very careful not to permit the possibility of being seen at or near the camp. Taggart was very careful to let it be known that he had never been at the camp, did not even know for sure where it was; that he trusted entirely to his cruisers and working bosses at this camp. So he did not see; he had his knowledge of Gaston's tactics entirely through the eyes of Murphy; and Murphy saw Gaston only as a man who was making strenuous efforts to "get solid with the old man."

One grey, muggy afternoon when snow, ice, trees—the whole world—seemed to be steaming, Gaston walked down the lake to where the river ran out and saw running down the middle of the stream a wide ribbon of black water. In the lake, above the head of the stream, likewise, was an opening of clear water.

At intervals a rotting piece of grey ice cracked loose, slid into the water, and was whisked down-stream. It had grown warmer through the night, and the break-up was threatening.

Gaston looked back at the narrow strip of trees comprising the remainder of Rose Havens's white pines. There remained probably a two days' cut of the timber. Gaston was anxious to remain at the camp until the last tree was down, but as he looked up at the grey, dripping sky he saw that this might not be.

There was a probability of rain in the clouds above, a warm, thawing Spring rain. If it came the ice would go out in a rush, the lake would rise, and the first free logs of the cut would start down the river. As Gaston had several highly important matters to accomplish before such an eventuality, he merely looked around to make sure that he was unobserved and departed from that camp suddenly and for good.

Four hours later Dr. Sanders's dog, Samson, hearing a light tapping on the rear window of the doctor's private sanctum, emitted the ominous growl with which he presaged the coming of his full-throated bark. Dr. Sanders came in to investigate. At first he started at what he saw through the window. A few seconds later he locked the door to the front office, opened the window and assisted Gaston to crawl into the room.

"What ho!" The doctor, being an experienced man, had closed the window and pulled down the curtain before uttering a word of greeting. "Hm, hm. I say, 'Big Fellow,' you do pick original ways in which to hit town. First on Red Shirt's neck, next with Hale and his bum leg, and now through my back window. I—I'm getting keener for you every time I see you, Thorson. You're original. Have some of the few drops of hooch Tom Pine and I have saved for you."

"Tom's in town, then?"

"Yep. In town and in sorrow. He says that town is no place for him, and if it wasn't for your orders he'd be out in the bush, which is the only fit place for a man to live, according to him."

"Can you get Tom here, Doc, and Hale, without letting any one else know I'm in town?"

The doctor looked Gaston over with half-closed eyes.

"Something in the wind, Thorson?"

"Something in the wind."

"Going to tell me what it is?"

"Going to tell nobody what it is."

"Quite so."

The doctor nodded. He saw that it was a different Gaston, cold, grim, cautious, dogged, who was before him, and he went forth without another word.

Gaston spoke without greetings when Tom Pine and Hale came into the room:

"No need for you to hear any of this, Doc, nor you, Tom; the fewer, the safer. That's right; you two keep watch outside. Well, Hale, have you got that outfit together?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"In the cellar of my store."

"And a couple Winchesters with about two hundred cartridges and grub for a week?"

"I've got them in stock."

"All right. Can you haul it all out there—you know where—to-night?"

"Yes."

"Will you do it?"

"Yes."

Gaston sat silent a moment.

"Hale, are you doing this with a free heart—without anything against me?"

"I think so, Thorson; yes. I am human. I have feelings. But I can truthfully say that I do this without any malice—that I even do it eagerly."

"I don't just see how you can do it, Hale."

Hale looked away.

"I'm Miss Havens's agent—and I can't save her logs for her," he said. "I believe you can. I am glad if

you can do it. I am anxious to do what I can to help you."

Gaston felt very uncomfortable. He rubbed his chin, looked sidewise at Hale, looked at the floor. Suddenly he sat up straight, listening. On the tin roof of the doctor's little building came a soft, rhythmic drumming, pleasant to listen to, suggestive of Spring, of soft, steaming earth, of green things growing.

"Rain," said Gaston quietly.

He rose, relieved. No time for finer feelings now; no time for anything but action.

"She's coming," he said. "The logs will be on running water within twenty-four hours. Hale, we've got to get that stuff out of town and up there as soon as we can without being seen."

Hale nodded. "That can be done right away. Nobody's likely to be out in this rain."

"Then let it be right away. Tom Pine will help you load. I'll meet you fellows on the road some place."

He waited until Hale and Tom had gone, then slid past the curious doctor into the black, wet night. Beside the doctor's building he paused an instant and held his hands out in the rain. He smiled grimly as he felt that the drops were warm.

It was a true Spring rain, starting in with a quiet, steady patter that presaged a heavy rainfall before morning. The ground, now bare and brown in spots, had begun to steam warmly. There was no mistake about it, fortune favoured him so far. The break-up was coming suddenly this Spring, and this served his purpose admirably.

Gaston did not start at once up the river. Through the mist and rain the lights from the houses shone hazily, yet one of these lights attracted and held his attention. It shone from the house in the big yard

behind the post-office and Gaston stood and stared at it as if fascinated.

"Yes," he mused after awhile, "that's from the dining-room, all right."

He had neglected to button his mackinaw, and the rain was finding its way down his neck, but he failed to notice it. Presently he began stalking slowly toward the hazy light, the softened ground and snow squirting beneath his rubbers.

He took a roundabout way, climbed over the fence and cautiously moved toward the window whence the light shone. The light drew him as a magnet. He stood to one side of the window and peered in.

Rose and her mother were at the table. Gaston looked long and prayerfully. Then he swung away from the light toward the darkness, the wet, the hardships of the woods; and he carried with him a dream which at times intoxicated him with hope, and which again he put from him as something for which he was completely unfitted.

CHAPTER XIX

THE TRAP

WHEN he struck the river road he heard the plump of hoofs and the rumble of wheels ahead of him. Presently he made out Hale's voice, steadying the horses in low tones. Then the deep tones of Tom Pine, who was riding with Hale.

Gaston made no move to overtake the wagon. He was in no mood to ride beside Hale. For Hale persisted in appearing and reappearing in the dream which Gaston was dreaming. Hale would have fitted in the picture which Gaston had seen through the window; but, try as he would, Gaston could not quite see himself as a part of it.

"Hale, there, he's one solid, dependable citizen," he soliloquised as he trudged along. "He's the kind who's got a right to things like that. I'm about as dependable as a single wolf on the travel. And a wolf certainly has no right to things like that."

He plumped ahead, rolling the matter over and over in his mind.

"Oh, well, I suppose a man can change, can't he?" he argued with himself. "Of course, the way I am now I wouldn't have any business thinking of her. But if I can change——"

The dream was on again. He marched forward, lost in his thoughts, until he heard Hale pull up at their rendezvous.

"All right, Hale," he said, coming up to the wagon. "We'll unload right here. Then you get back to town

as quick as you can. No use your running chances of being seen out here to-night."

The wagon was swiftly unloaded. Hale turned the team back toward the settlement.

"Anything more, Thorson?" he asked.

"No, thanks."

"All right. Good luck, then. Giddap."

"Hold on." Gaston sprang forward. "Hale, I want to shake hands with you—if you'll do it."

"Why, sure."

Their hands met in the darkness. Gaston searched for an expression of his feelings as the team pulled away.

"By the great stump, Hale!" he called, "I believe you're as good a man as myself."

"And now," said Tom Pine, as Gaston turned back to him, "I suppose you got time to tell me something about what you been doing these last days or so?"

"Later," replied Gaston briskly. "There'll be plenty of time to tell all about that later on. In the meantime we got a little hard bone-labour ahead of us. Packing this load of truck comes first of all. Come on; grab a shoulder-load and follow me. Leave that dynamite box till daylight. We won't run any risks of dropping it in the dark."

Through the darkness and rain Gaston led the way straight to the Big Bayou. At the first coming of daylight they made their last trip, to bring the box containing the all-important dynamite, and to erase as much as possible all traces of their trail. The rain had ceased now, the ice was out, and the river was racing bank-full.

Gaston looked out over the brown, ice-specked flood, with practiced eye.

"They'll have the head of her down here to-morrow morning this time," he said.

"Who will?" demanded Tom Pine. "Gaston Olaf, you open your sluices and run me a little information or I'm going to get real sour on you. What are we here for? What are we going to do here? And what's all this scheming about?"

Gaston told him in perhaps a score of plain, simple words. Tom Pine's eyes widened, his mouth opened. He sat down slowly, gasping as if the breath had been knocked out of him.

"Hell's fire and six bits!" he exploded at last.

That was his single and sole expression concerning Gaston's revelations. The piratical boldness of the scheme revealed deprived him of the power of further comment. At times he looked at Gaston with awe, at times a grin wrinkled his face. And when Gaston threw off his mackinaw, Tom Pine promptly did the same, eagerly following his young leader to the tremendous task before them.

First, with the aid of a rude log raft, they stretched the long boom-chain straight across the rock-filled rapids at a point slightly below the head of Big Bayou. So far as log-running was concerned the river thereby was shut off. The chains would act as a net, catching and holding the first logs of the drive among the rocks. The current would do the rest.

Given five minutes' stoppage there in the rocky channel, and a drive would be jammed as certainly as the logs came down. With this accomplished, and with the stream at flood-tide, water and logs would seek for the line of least resistance for a possible way around the obstruction.

Gaston Olaf and Tom Pine went directly from their toil in the icy, rushing water of the rapids, to provide another way for logs and current after the rapids should become jammed. In the narrow point of land separating the head of Big Bayou and the river they

delved and mined for the better part of half a day.

"It all depends on this shot," said Gaston, as he tamped stick after stick of dynamite into the holes they had dug below water level. "If we can shoot a channel into the bayou, we've got a chance to win."

"It will do it," said Tom. "It's frozen sand. The charge we're putting in will shoot a twenty-five-foot channel as sure as that's dynamite."

When the last charge was in place they covered the holes to muffle the sound, lighted the fuses and ran for a cover. There was a space of waiting; then, down in the ground, a sudden rumbling, like deep thunder. The mined ground heaved and shook, rose in the air, and spattered the landscape for hundreds of yards around.

Gaston and Tom ran forward. Then they solemnly shook hands. A channel twenty-five or thirty feet in width had been blown out and the La Croix River was pouring a good portion of its flood into the placid waters of Big Bayou.

"She's as good as set," jubilated Tom Pine. "Yes, sir, Gaston Olaf, our trap's as good as set."

"When we get our boom across the lower end of the bayou she is," replied Gaston.

Across the lower end of the half-mile-long bayou they stretched the short boom-chain, thereby making of the bayou practically a mill-pond within which every log of a small drive—a drive similar to Taggart's—might ride in perfect security. This task was completed after the coming of darkness, and when the last spike was driven Tom Pine threw himself on the wet ground and slept like the dead.

Gaston did not sleep. He went up the river until, at the confluence of the La Croix and its west branch he met the head of the drive, slowly moving from the small stream out into the grasp of the larger river's

current. It was still dark when he returned to Big Bayou, but he made no attempt at resting. He sat with folded arms, staring grimly up the river, waiting for the daylight of the day that would mark the beginning of war to the death between Devil Dave Taggart and himself.

As the first traces of dawn disturbed the darkness in the east, he built a fire and cooked breakfast. Then he awoke Tom Pine and they ate in silence. It was daylight when the meal was completed. As one they looked toward the river. Far up above the rapids they could see a few black specks bobbing on the rushing water, the first stray logs announcing the coming of the drive. Gaston rose, picked up one of the rifles, loaded it and filled his pockets with cartridges.

"You're not to do any shooting except to save your life," he said. "You just keep the new channel open. That's your job."

"Sure," said Tom Pine. "But—hello! Hear that."

From far up the river a shout came echoing faintly through the morning stillness.

"There she is," said Gaston. "I'll catch 'em at the point above. So long."

"So long," said Tom Pine, and looked on wistfully as Gaston jacked a cartridge into the barrel and stalked up-stream to meet the drive.

CHAPTER XX

HOW TAGGART LOST THE DRIVE

HALF a mile above the new channel which had been blown into Big Bayou, the river narrowed, running swift and deep between high banks. At one point in the narrows a cliff-like rock jutted out over the water, commanding the river above for a mile, or to the nearest curve.

Gaston made his way to behind this rock and lay down. The rock hid him like a natural breastwork. As yet there was nothing in the river above him save a few scattered stray logs. Gaston lay still and watched.

The first rays of the rising sun struck the rock. The grey of dawn lifted from the river, the rosy sunshine gleamed upon the rushing waters, and around the curve above, running free and strong, came the compact head of the drive from the lake.

Gaston Olaf carefully wiped the sights of his rifle, thrust it forward to a rest on the rock, with the muzzle pointing up-stream, and waited. The drive came on steadily, a solid brown carpet of logs, half a mile long and as wide as the river, borne on the crest of the flood that had washed it out of the lake, down the west branch and into the swollen La Croix.

Here and there men bobbed up and down on its heaving surface. On its head rode two men, resting on their pike-poles, and on each bank more men walked along, ready to leap in and work if the logs threat-

ened to jam. There was no need for their services. The drive was riding steadily on high water, with no obstacle in sight to hinder its slow, steady progress.

At four hundred yards Gaston recognised the first man on the drive as the camp boss, Murphy. At three hundred yards he saw that the other drivers were all strangers to him. Taggart, to hide his tracks more thoroughly, had brought in a strange crew of river men to take the logs down the river.

Gaston cocked his rifle and waited. When the head of the drive was two hundred yards away, he began firing slowly, methodically, accurately, sending his bullets so close to the feet of the men that one after another they leaped in fright.

Five shots Gaston fired in as many seconds, and the five men in advance stood aghast at the sudden reports and the sinister *whew* of lead uncomfortably near. Ere they had located the shooter, the five shots were repeated. Chips, water and mud flew in the air so close to them that some actually were spattered. The first volley had stricken them helpless with surprise; the second brought them back to their senses and told them what to do.

They were river-men, they were paid to take chances with logs and water, not with bullets, and as one man they dropped peavies and cant-hooks and ran for cover. Murphy, to his credit, stopped on the bank and peered toward the rock, striving to locate the shooter. A final shot dropped at his heels and he followed the others into the timber.

Gaston quickly reloaded his rifle. The head of the drive was coming on, steadily, safely, nearing the trap he had set for it.

"That's just the first tuning up," he mused. "The real dance will begin a little later."

He was right. River-men are not the kind to submit

quietly to gun-fire without seeking to return the compliment, and in the batteau following the drive were a couple of rifles. Presently, from five or six hundred yards up the river came the crack of a shot and a bullet dropped in the water fifty feet away.

"Pretty bad," mused Gaston. "They'll have to do better than that."

A second shot sounded and a bullet struck, splatt! against a near-by tree.

"A little better," thought Gaston, and crouched closer on the stone.

Half a dozen shots more were fired, none of them coming close enough to warrant a return. It was not a part of Gaston's programme to hurt anybody, and he merely lay low, satisfied with the fact that the drive each minute was nearing the bayou.

The head of the drive now was in the narrows beneath him, and the swift water had caught the logs and was whisking them on to where Tom Pine was waiting. So long as that went on undisturbed the men above were welcome to waste as many cartridges as they pleased.

It did not last long. The firing stopped abruptly and Murphy appeared, peering around the trunk of a tree on the bank, and waving a bandanna handkerchief as a flag of truce.

"Hold up there! What are you trying to do?" he demanded.

Gaston debated not for a moment his course of action. He drove a bullet through the tree a yard above Murphy's head and chuckled at the fashion in which the foreman got out of sight.

There was a lull. Several minutes went by, and with each minute the drive drew nearer to the Big Bayou. Suddenly the shooting resumed from up the river, two rifles throwing lead at the rock as rapidly as the levers

could work. At the same time, far back at the middle of the drive, two men ran out bearing a steel cable, followed by a man bearing a sledge.

"Good idea. Trying to cable half of her up," mused Gaston.

He treated the riflemen to two shots apiece, and, raising his sights, shot carefully near the cable-men. At the third shot the men dropped the cable and ran for cover.

Gaston smiled grimly. The entire drive now was within sweep of his rifle, and his shooting by this time had warned the men against exposing themselves in any effort to halt the logs.

"They've got to put me out of business to win," he muttered, as he watched the logs rushing past. "And if they don't do it in another hour they'll lose."

The firing from up-stream was resumed immediately after the cable-men had been driven to cover. The bullets whined overhead, struck dully against the rock, or chipped slivers from the logs below. The shooting was very bad. Evidently the shooters were thinking more of their own security than of their marksmanship. When it showed signs of improving, Gaston methodically pumped shots in the direction of the rifles. The rest of the time he lay tightly behind the rock, content so long as each minute carried thousands of feet of Rose Havens' pines down toward the Big Bayou.

Half of the drive had passed him when a sudden rattle of shots sounded down the river.

"They've gone around me," muttered Gaston. "They've sneaked through the timber—and Tom Pine is sending them on their way. It's time I got back to Tom."

Sending two final shots up the river, he crawled backward from the rock, keeping his retreat hidden un-

til he was in the timber. Then he ran, as he never ran before, for the head of Big Bayou.

He was just in time. The trap had worked, but it had worked too well. The drive had jammed on the chain-boom in the rapids, and the jam had spread until the channel into the bayou threatened to become choked as well.

"Whitewater men to the front!" bellowed Tom Pine from behind the shelter of a tree, whence he was conducting a long-range drill with a hidden adversary in the timber. "She's beginning to jam, but that fellow out in the bush there'll shoot the eyebrows off you if you try to break her."

Gaston threw down his rifle and grasped a peavey.

"Don't try it, Gaston Olaf!" cried Tom. "Let's go hunt that fellow out first."

"No time." Gaston was running toward the logs. "She'll break through the boom unless she's started into the bayou in a hurry."

A bullet greeted him as he leaped out on the jam. He did not even turn his head. Over the heaving, rising carpet of logs in the new channel he ran, his eyes bent upon but one thing, to find the key-log and wrench it free before the jam should become too solid to move.

The logs tossed and tumbled crazily in the rush of high water in the bayou. Now Gaston stood securely on a log butt, now the butt up-ended and he was in the water.

The rifleman in the woods grew very busy as he saw Gaston's purpose. *Whack, whee!* The bullets thudded against the logs and cut the air around him. He found the key-log, an old dead-head with one butt jammed into the bottom, the other jutting up like a rock, spearing the drive and causing the jam to form about it.

Whack, whee!

In spite of Tom Pine's furious fire the man in the woods was dropping his bullets closer and closer to the frenzied giant toiling among the boiling logs.

Ping!

A pitch-knot, bullet-loosened, flipped up and cut a crease in Gaston's cheek, and blood and perspiration streamed together. He did not trouble to wipe it away, nor did he utter any exclamation. All his strength and breath were in demand as, like one of his Norse ancestors gone berserk, he tossed log after log to one side as he dug for the key-log.

Plump!

Water splashed in his eyes, blinding him for an instant. The gunman had the range now, but he was a little off on his line.

Whack!

A bullet thudded into the key-log the instant it was bare. Gaston drove the spike of his peavey into the log and heaved. The log merely turned over, held securely by the mud of the bottom.

Gaston looked up. Above his head the logs were rising in tangled tiers. In a few minutes more the jam in the channel would be solid, and the logs in the river, deprived of the line of least resistance, undoubtedly would break through the boom and go on downstream.

The logs in the channel hung on the key-log as on a hair-trigger. The second that log was released those tangled tiers would spew themselves into the bayou explosively, riding down everything in their way.

Gaston threw away his peavey. A bullet splashed the water at his feet. Carelessly he kissed his hand to the hidden rifleman, to the logs hanging over his head, to Tom Pine, to the bright, sunny world which he with his young, full life joyed in so tremendously.

He drove into the muddy water where the butt of the key-log was lodged. Down under the water his back went under the log, and with all his strength he heaved upward. Tom Pine saw his face for one clear instant as it came above water, the muddy butt of the key-log clasped in his arms. The rest was a mighty roar as of an explosion, a fury of tumbling, shooting logs, of whipped-up water, of the thunder and indescribable force of a jam suddenly released in a pressure of high, swift water.

Tom Pine dropped his rifle and ran down the bank of the bayou, keeping pace with the first rushing logs.

"'Tain't human," he groaned, "'tain't human for any one to do it and live, but I never see him killed yet."

His quick old eyes found the key-log, and he groaned. No sign of Gaston on it. Then suddenly Tom Pine shouted from the bottom of a heart filled with gladness. On the butt of the log as it went down the bayou he discerned a huge brown hand maintaining a precarious but firm grasp.

Immediately a second hand appeared. Tom Pine sat down, weak with joy as Gaston drew his head above water and gasped for air.

"Is she running in?" were Gaston's first words.

"As fast as water will carry logs," cried Tom. "Gaston—Gaston Olaf, you had me awful blue there for a minute. I didn't think you'd make her—I didn't, for a fact."

So did Tom Pine attest that the feat had been superhuman.

Gaston drew himself up on the log and sat straddle of the butt while he filled his lungs with the precious air. He looked back toward the channel. The logs were moving into the bayou in a steady stream, the rushing water from the river thrusting them in as in

a mill-race. Gaston grinned as he pulled himself to his feet and came across the heaving logs to where Tom sat.

"Good enough so far," said he. "Now get the guns and we'll go hunt that fellow who pestered us from the woods."

CHAPTER XXI

"YOU CAN'T LIVE HERE AFTER THIS"

THE firing from the woods had stopped. Gaston and Tom swiftly covered the ground in the direction whence the shots had come, without drawing any fire or discovering any trace of their assailant.

"That's funny," said Gaston. "Back to the river, Tom; they may be blocking the drive."

They hurried back, but there was no one in sight about the river.

"Lay low, Gaston Olaf," warned Tom; "they're prob'ly holding back for a sure crack at us."

For a while they lay behind cover, waiting and watching for the men of the drive to reveal themselves. Five, ten, fifteen minutes went by, and not a man was seen nor a shot fired.

The logs were beginning to jam again in the entrance to the bayou and Gaston once more laid down rifle for peavey and sprang out in their midst.

"If they're still laying for us, we'll soon find out," he said as he set to work.

He cleared the tangle, set the logs to running freely again and came back to shore without drawing a single shot. Tom Pine was scratching his head in puzzled fashion.

"I can't figger it, Gaston Olaf, I can't for a fact," he muttered. "Taggart ain't the kind of timber boss to send down a drive of fine stuff like this without having anyhow a few of the real old, pure-quill river-dogs in the crew, and river-men ain't going to

let nobody take a drive away from them without a fight.

"The way they started in swapping lead for lead with you, proves there was some of the old style in this crew. Then this fellow, who was put off here in the woods, he had the right idea. He knew what he was doing when he tried to keep you from breaking that little jam. Why do they give it up sudden now? There ain't over half of their logs in the bayou yet. Why do they quit like this? River-men don't usually drop a fight till the last dog's hung."

"I don't know. I suspect Taggart's hand in it, because the men wouldn't stop fighting unless they'd got orders. We won't bother our heads about that, though. Those logs out there belong to Miss Havens. We're here to see that they get safe and snug into Big Bayou, where they'll be out of Taggart's hands till the news is broken that he's a thief and caught in the act."

It was noon now, and while Tom prepared a meal Gaston kept the logs flowing steadily. After the meal Tom took his turn with the peavey while, rifle in hand, Gaston went up the river to the tail of the drive. He came back grinning.

"Not a man in sight, Tom," he called. "They've even pulled the batteau back up-stream. Taggart has been notified and has called them off, or I'm badly mistaken. The old hound will be up to something pretty soon. Probably send a gang of shooters up here to run us off. Well, we'll sit tight and give 'em back as good as they send."

But no gang of shooters came. For the rest of the day the logs came floating into Big Bayou without let or hindrance, and Gaston and Tom worked them down without the slightest molestation. Evening came, and the bayou was covered with a solid carpet of logs.

As the last straggling sticks of the drive swung

through the new channel, Gaston exploded a charge of dynamite in the middle of the jam which had caught on the boom across the river. The blast blew jam and boom to pieces, and the La Croix ceased to pour its waters into the bayou and went rushing bank-high down its old channel. The waters of the bayou promptly sank to their normal placid level, and two million feet of Rose Havens' white pine rode on its bosom as snug and steady as if in the mill-pond awaiting a buyer.

When the last log was in the bayou, when the water was normal, when the boom at the bayou's mouth had been tested, when all was secure, Tom Pine threw his cap on the ground, leaped three feet in the air and whooped.

"We did it! By the great pike pole, we did it! We've snatched a man's sized drive smack out of old Dave Taggart's hands, and the old devil will be laughed out of the woods for the trick we've put on him. Whoop! Let 'er roar, Gaston Olaf, let 'er roar!"

But Gaston Olaf refused to let 'em roar at all. He shook his head, grimly viewing the work of his head, heart and hands, and knowing that it was not done.

"That would be right about any other man in the woods," he admitted. "For any other timber thief to have a drive stolen away from him like this would settle him. The boys would laugh at him till he'd have to pack up his traps and travel. But old Taggart isn't any common man. He's got his hand laid so heavy on this country that they won't even dare laugh at him about this. And we haven't put the trick on him yet, Tom. We'd better save our crow for a while; old Dave'll try to make us eat it before we're through here."

Tom Pine shook his head, disappointed.

"Gaston Olaf, I can't figger you lately. You're changing, somehow. By the great pike-pole! A month ago you'd 'a' been singing over a job like this. Now to hear you talk you'd lost confidence, or something. What's happened to you, boy? Getting old?"

Gaston busied himself preparing supper without offering a reply. Tom Pine watched him closely and sadly.

"I know what's the matter with you," he said at last. "You're Norwegian now and you're thinking of settling down."

"Perhaps I am. What of it?"

"What of it? Why, just this: you ain't made for it, that's all. You're made for the trail, and if you settled down and lived in a house, some day your feet'd get to working and you'd kick open the door and just natur'lly travel."

"You may be right, Tom," muttered Gaston half aloud. "If you are, then it wouldn't be square for me to try to settle down. Well, drop that. You roll in and get your sleep right after supper. I'll stand watch for the first half of the night. We can't let 'em catch us napping."

The night passed without incident. Morning came, a bright, lazy Spring morning, and still no sign from Taggart. Tom and Gaston breakfasted, made a circle in the woods on each side of the river and returned without finding trace of a single man.

The forenoon passed and still no one disturbed them. It was well past the middle of the afternoon and Tom was whittling shavings against the time for cooking supper, when a stick was cracked sharply in the woods toward the road. The two watchers methodically picked up their rifles and methodically threw themselves behind cover. More sticks cracked in the woods. Some one was coming boldly toward the

bayou, by the noise two or more people, and they were walking without any attempt to hide their coming.

"They've got their nerve, thinking to walk up on us that way," muttered Tom, and as he spoke Rose Havens, Hale, and Taggart, walking together, stepped from the shadows of the timber into the bright sunlight and stood looking down at the log-covered bayou.

Gaston laid down his rifle and stood up.

"Hello, folks!" he called, stepping toward them. "Hello, Taggart. There you are—the two million feet of Miss Havens' timber that you were stealing. And here I am—I'm the man responsible for their being here."

From his position on a rise in the bank Taggart looked down at Gaston with an expression of great sadness.

"Thorson," he said, slowly shaking his head, "did you know all the time that we were cutting logs on Miss Havens' timberland?"

Gaston gasped. If ever there was a picture of elderly uprightness, of honesty saddened by a suspicionable error, it was frock-coated, bearded David Taggart, as he stood there in the sunlight with the dark woods at his back.

On one side stood Hale, a little puzzled perhaps, but apparently satisfied; on the other side was Rose, and her face was almost jubilant. Gaston looked from one to the other, and before his amazement would permit him to speak, Taggart continued:

"If you did—as your actions lead me to suppose—didn't you realise what a terrible injustice you were doing me, your employer, by not informing me of the fact?"

Almost ministerial was Taggart as he uttered these words. Unquestionably he had convinced Rose and Hale that his sorrow was genuine; unquestionably he

was near to convincing Gaston. But the young giant looked up at the clean sky, at the solemn trees, at the clean water, and his woods-instinct whispered to him to be on guard, that something was wrong. Nevertheless he said:

"Taggart, do you mean to say you didn't know that timber was Miss Havens'?"

Solemnly, mournfully, Taggart shook his head.

"Thorson, when I first laid eyes on you," he said quietly, "I analysed you like this: an excellent young man of great possibilities, but too prone to jump at conclusions, too much predisposed to violence." He smiled a little, sadly, pityingly. "I am afraid we must laugh a little at you, Thorson. You have performed a valiant deed—a notable deed—but a rather ridiculous one, considering that it was absolutely unnecessary." He seemed to struggle to control his smile. "As you know, Thorson, I had nothing to do with your camp—never visited it."

Gaston's teeth bit back an exclamation as he thought of Taggart's secret morning visit to Murphy.

"I pay my cruisers good money to locate my camps. The man who located this one is no longer in my employ. He was discharged this morning when, after the report that you had stopped this drive, I investigated and found to my sorrow that we had been cutting Miss Havens' timber. I am not so young as I was. Time was, when I would have fought for these logs until the last court in the land had judged against me. But I'm getting old. I'm not as ambitious as I was. Consequently Miss Havens and Mr. Hale and myself are up here to agree on a fair price for me to pay for the logs I have unwittingly thought were mine."

Gaston smiled back at him now.

"That's all I was after, old timer," he said lightly. "If Miss Havens gets paid, that's all I did this for."

"And I thank you for it, Mr. Thorson," said Rose. "It seems you're forever putting me under obligations which I see no way of repaying. But I would rather have lost every penny of it all if that poor man dies."

Gaston looked at her in amazement, and saw that she was struggling between gratitude and horror.

"What poor man?" he asked after a while.

"Murphy," said Taggart with a click of his jaws. "Oh, yes; you can't do things like this without paying for them, Thorson. Poor Murphy; I'm afraid he is done for. Shot through the hips, when he thought he was well out of range, too. We've hurried him down to La Croix, but there's hardly any hope. A bad, bad business. And so absolutely unnecessary, too."

Once more Gaston's woods-sense whispered to him to be on guard, that something was wrong, but for the life of him he could not sense where the wrong might be.

"If I've hurt a man as bad as that, I suppose the sheriff will be up from La Croix to get me. I'll go down to the settlement to save him coming up here."

"We'll see you through, Thorson," shot out Hale. "It's too bad, but we'll be with you."

"Every cent I've got to defend you if necessary," said Rose. "But I'm so, so sorry it had to happen."

Old Taggart scratched his chin.

"Thorson, I've been thinking that over on the way out here. You quit me cold; you suspected me; you took my drive away from my men, but just the same I'm your debtor for having called this deplorable error of my cruiser to my attention. You did it criminally, but let that go. Through you I find it out in time to rectify it before my name is smirched by suspicion. For that I'll give you a little advice—clear out! Quit the La Croix country. Start upstream, right now, and

keep going till you've put this country behind you forever. I'll see that you get away, and I'll fix it with Murphy. Take this as the solemn truth from me. It's your only chance, for you can't live here after this."

Gaston threw back his head and laughed the old wolf full in the face.

"'Can't'! That's a strong word, Taggart. Now you take this from me: neither you nor any other man can tell me where I can or can not live."

Taggart's eyes narrowed. His jaws snapped. His head shot forward.

"That settles you, Thorson," he growled. "You're done for. You had your chance, now you haven't got any." He turned abruptly to Hale and Rose. "Now, let us get to business, please, and agree on the price."

Gaston turned abruptly away, swinging into the timber at a pace that made Tom Pine dog-trot to keep up. Something was wrong; something sinister was beneath the surface of all this. He sensed it clearly, but the thing was too deeply hidden for him to see. Taggart was lying. He had been to the camp; he knew where it was. Yet he was preparing to pay for the logs, apparently in good faith. Where was the hitch?

The report about Murphy also puzzled him. He and Tom had scoured the woods up the river and had found nothing to indicate that any one had been hurt. They had heard no cry. If Murphy had been hurt, his companions naturally would have swarmed to avenge him rather than tamely drop the fight. On the other hand, where there was so much shooting there was always the possibility of a stray bullet doing sore damage.

"But a man shot through the hips would bleed," he said suddenly aloud. "And there wasn't a drop of blood where the crew had been tracking around."

"I smelled skunk, too," said Tom Pine. "She's a

queer one, but somehow I can't locate the animal. For one thing it looks to me like Taggart was running a bluff to scare you out of the country."

"That's the straight look of it, all right," agreed Gaston, "but Taggart's tracks run too crooked to make such a simple trail. He wants to send me out of the country, that's sure; but there's something behind all that. We'll go down and see Doc Sanders and find out how much Murphy was hurt. Then we'll wait for that sheriff, and keep our eyes peeled for signs."

CHAPTER XXII

TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND—CASH

HELLO, pirates!"

Dr. Sanders, hearkening to a light knock on his back window, opened the door and let Gaston and Tom slip into his private sanctum. It was well after dark. The pair had taken a roundabout way through the woods, avoiding the road, and had entered the settlement without being observed.

Dr. Sanders slammed the door shut behind them, pulled down the curtain, leaped in the air, and, beating time with both arms, gave three cheers, in a whisper.

"You did it, boys! You've done a doughty deed. All my life I've been hoping somebody would do something like it. Didn't seem fair that all the doughty deeds should have been done before I was born. Now I die happy. Captain Kidd has been outdid, almost before my eyes. Stealing a log-drive, lock, stock, and barrel, from Devil Dave Taggart! Boys, you were born after your time. You darned old pirates and buccaneers, have a drink."

"How badly was Murphy shot up?" asked Gaston, when the ebullient doctor had subsided.

Dr. Sanders raised his eyebrows.

"Let's have that again, please. Somebody shot up?"

"Murphy," said Gaston. "I understand he's plugged through the hips and not much hope for him? I suppose they brought him to you first?"

The doctor shook his head.

"This is the first I've heard of that. Nobody has been shot up in this neck of the woods since Hale got it in the leg, that I know of. Whence this news, Thorson?"

Gaston repeated what Taggart had said concerning Murphy. As he talked, Dr. Sanders's shrewd eyes narrowed to a wink and he rolled his tongue in one side of his mouth.

"I don't say that I see an Ethiopian in the woodpile," said he, when Gaston had done, "but I do insist I catch a whiff of something dark complected. Why, if the aforesaid Murphy was sorely wounded, as alleged, was he not taken here for first treatment, at least? Men shot through the hips are poor risks to be toting around the country unnecessarily. To get to La Croix the alleged wounded gentleman must have been taken through this settlement right under my nose. Without boasting professionally I may say that my reputation for treating gunshot wounds and so forth is not of the poorest, thanks to the activities of Taggart's henchmen. Boys, if there isn't something rotten about that I'll—I'll call my bull-dog 'Maude' for the rest of his life."

"Has the drive-crew come into town?"

"Every mother's son of 'em. Came in yesterday afternoon. Been trying to take the town apart ever since."

"Was Murphy among them? Did you know him?"

The doctor thought for a moment.

"I know him when I see him. Come to think of it, I haven't seen him with the gang."

"Do you know if any team has gone to La Croix? They'd have to take him down with a team if he was that badly hurt."

The doctor shook his head.

"I had a call down the river this morning. Polack

settler's wife. Confinement case. The road is pure, undisturbed mud; there hasn't a rig gone down for forty-eight hours."

"Then it's pretty safe to say that Taggart lied about that. He's got something up his sleeve. Well, we'll wait and see what it is. Now, how about the rest of it? Do you know if he's settled up?"

The doctor nodded.

"He has. In me you behold one of the witnesses to the transaction, which has just been completed. Taggart paid Miss Havens twenty-five thousand dollars for her logs, just as they lay in the water—twenty-five thousand dollars!"

Gaston gave a long sigh of relief.

"Good enough. Then the girl's got her money. That's a fair price, considering that Taggart's men did the cutting. Twenty-five thousand——"

"Cash," said the doctor.

"What?"

"Cash-money. Paid in hand, hundred-dollar bills."

Gaston sat looking at the doctor in stupid silence. Somewhere in the back of his head he felt the same throb which, up at the bayou, had told him there was something wrong about the tale of Murphy's wounding. Twenty-five thousand dollars—cash! The words carried with them the sense of something sinister, but what?

"Twenty-five thousand dollars—cash," he repeated blankly. "Was it good money?"

"I looked at it. So did Postmaster Perkins, and Hale, and three others who weren't Taggart's friends. Fact is he insisted on calling in folks who are Rose Havens's friends to witness the deal. It looked good to us."

Gaston walked the floor in keen discomfort.

"That's an awful lot of money to be kept in a town

like this with that gang all drunk." Suddenly he shot out, "What did she do with it?"

"Oh, that's all right. It's safe enough. She put it in Hale's safe; he's express agent, too, you know. Oh, yes, the money's safe and sound enough. No trouble about that. And say, Thorson——"

"Well?"

"Somebody was asking if you'd been seen around town."

"Well, I hadn't been."

"So I told her."

"And I haven't been now."

"Eh?"

"You haven't seen me. I'm not in town. I haven't been here. Understand?"

"As much as a pig does of flute-playing. What's the idea now?"

"Just that—I'm not in town. Neither is Tom Pine. Haven't been seen."

The doctor stroked his beard.

"But, Thorson, I was going to add that somebody explicitly ordered me to ask you to call in case I did see you. How about that?"

Gaston was tempted. The desire to see Rose, to hear her speak, was strong upon him. But he put the thoughts of her from him sternly.

"The play still goes as I first made it," he said. "You haven't seen Tom or me at all. Now let us out your back way after making sure that nobody's looking. I've got to think, and this room suffocates me."

He led the way from the doctor's, away from the lights of the settlement, up to the spot on the hill from which he and Tom had slid so opportunely on their first arrival in Havens Falls. The slope was bare now, and half-way up Gaston found a convenient

windfall, and seated himself with Tom at his side. Down below them the lights shone from the houses of the settlement. The light from the Havens's window was almost beneath them; but Gaston looked beyond it, down to where the red lights twinkled and the drive-crew roared in the river front.

In the upper part of town—the town proper, where the permanent, respectable citizens of Havens Falls had their stores and homes—it was quiet and dark. Though the dark Spring evening was warm enough to justify open-flung windows and doors after the cooped-up Winter, the houses and stores there were well closed.

In the houses curtains were being drawn. The stores were locked up and darkened. There was no activity. Folk were staying close to their firesides in that part of town; and one had only to look and listen to the noise in the lower end, where the red lights winked, to learn the reason why.

As Dr. Sanders had said, the gang down there was bent upon taking the town apart. When a gang of woodsmen thus descends upon a settlement, quiet, respectable citizens lock up their places of business and remain behind locked doors, that peace and order, and their own heads, may be the better conserved.

While Havens Falls was a small, new settlement, its river front was startlingly adequate and complete. Young, brown-skinned lumber-jacks, ramping with health and craving excitement after months of monotony in camp, came down the river to Taggart's office and drew their checks. Often that check represented six months' toiling, toying with danger, even death; not infrequently a red-cheeked, lusty girl waited somewhere for the young woodsman who was to marry her on his Winter's stake. But one drink wouldn't hurt a man, reasoned young Jack, as he stood

outside Taggart's office and looked over the river front, which was so situated that he could not escape seeing it after he had drawn his check. No, one drink with the boys wouldn't hurt. Of course he had promised the girl that there wouldn't be any more of that sort of thing now; but a man must be a pretty poor stick if one drink would hurt him, and besides, he had to say good-bye to the boys.

So he would have one drink in the first place on the front. And there the boys were cashing their checks and buying drinks, and young Jack had to be a man and hold his own. Good-bye, check! Good-bye, thoughts of a red-cheeked girl that held a man straight!

A week later, perhaps, some bartender, growing tired of seeing Jack hanging around, now that his money was gone, threw him out in the street. And Jack, now bleary-eyed, white and yellow, shaky and unshaven, drew his hand across his eyes as a man awakening from a bad dream to a worse reality, begged one drink to steady him, and—went back to the woods.

Yet it was brave and gay while it lasted, especially on a warm, still evening when a drive was down, and a score or more broad-shouldered, blue-shirted river-men took possession of the river-front. In most towns the townspeople laid low till the spasm was over, and the river-men went on their way. In Havens Falls, however, the worst men of the gang were permanent to the settlement, and, as a consequence, what happened in other river towns once a year, there was a permanent, impossible condition.

"They're doing her proud," ventured Tom Pine, as he and Gaston hearkened to the turmoil from the saloons. "Yes, siree, they certainly are letting her roar for fair."

Gaston nodded grimly. A few short weeks ago he

knew quite well that he would have been the leader of the celebration below. Now he saw the thing in a new light.

He measured with his eyes the distance from the red light to the light from Rose Havens's window, and he found it perilously short. He pictured the house as he had sat at table with Rose and her mother, and an exclamation of anger escaped him. That was a home. That was the kind of thing that counted, the right kind of thing, for which men, who were men, worked and saved, and even died to maintain.

His dream came back to him, the dream of such a home, such a woman for his own. And again he tried to put the dream away. What had he—the careless, reckless woods-vagabond—to do with such things?

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MONEY SAVED

"HELLO!" Tom Pine sat up as the shouts from below came nearer. "I believe they're coming up to this end of town."

It was true. The gang, apparently tiring of the saloons for a spell, had wandered into the decent part of town singing, shouting, laughing and cursing. At their coming more curtains were drawn down; lights went out and the houses became dark and still.

"That'll put the scared townfolk under the beds all right."

Gaston made no reply. He was thinking over the words he had heard Taggart speak to Murphy on that secret morning visit to the camp: "A man can't blow a safe and kill a marshal without paying for it, Murphy. That was clumsy—that killing—for an expert safe-blower, Murphy," and suddenly the trail began to grow clear, ridiculously clear. Murphy, safe-blower; $25,000 in Hale's safe.

The gang below swarmed about Olson's hotel. Mrs. Olson promptly locked her doors and pulled down the curtains. The gang grew in numbers. They surrounded the hotel. On the surface it was all good-natured, rough woodsmen's play, but to Gaston there was something too systematic in the way the men flocked about the hotel.

"Hale lives there," said he suddenly.

"Sure," agreed Tom. "What of it?"

"And he's probably in there now."

"That's a cinch. He'd be crazy to be out to-night."

"That gang will keep him in there."

"Sure. He isn't a fool; he won't show himself."

"So long, Tom," said Gaston, rising noiselessly.

"Hah?"

"So long. I've got something to attend to. You stay here. I know you've got a right to be in anything I'm in, but this is something where one man is as good as two."

He disappeared down-hill in the darkness before Tom could have followed, had he been so inclined, which he was not. He knew Gaston too well to fail to recognise a command.

Gaston went swiftly and unobserved to where Tom and he had cached their rifles on coming into town. He would have much preferred to have a shotgun for night work, but a rifle would have to do.

The darkness of the night favoured his plans; it permitted him to hide himself close to the window in the rear of Hale's store, so close that when Black Murphy came and broke in, which he did at a moment when the gang about the hotel and in the street set up such a concerted whooping that no one in town could hear the tinkling of broken glass, Gaston recognised the man on the instant. He laughed silently. He had guessed right. Taggart had lied about Murphy's being wounded to establish an alibi for what was about to happen.

Gaston half rose from his hiding-place under the impulse to capture Murphy and clear himself of the alleged shooting. He caught himself as a better idea unfolded itself. Murphy was small game, very small game. Gaston sat back and waited.

Out in the street the noise became a tornado. A score of men had joined hands and were dancing in a circle, singing at the top of their deep bull voices. It

was a regular woodsmen's celebration, but it was a trifle too consistent, the din was a little too incessant, too well sustained. It served its purpose, however, for it was only by listening intently that Gaston, close though he was to the window, caught the sound of a muffled explosion within Hale's store.

After that he had not long to wait. Murphy came out of the window, a small sack under his arm, looked out toward the noisy street to see if he was observed, and came straight toward where Gaston lay hidden.

Gaston held his breath. Was his fine plan going awry? If Murphy came stumbling on to him a sudden blow would lay him out, and restore the contents of the sack to its owner; but that was but a part of Gaston's scheme. He sat as immovable as the stump behind which he was hiding, as Murphy came swiftly on. Then he breathed again. Murphy had passed on the other side of the stump, and was swinging down toward the river.

Gaston, blessing the blackness of the night, rose and followed. He was glowing. This was living! Driving Taggart's men to cut Rose's pines, and then snatching the drive out of Taggart's hands, had been good. But this was the real thing: on a dark trail, and no knowing what lay at the end, except that it was sure to be strife and excitement! Gaston felt like singing.

He blessed, likewise, the stars that had kept Murphy from becoming a true woodsman. Murphy was wearing leather shoes. Gaston, in his soft rubber-bottomed "high-tops," could keep within hearing of Murphy's footsteps without revealing the fact that he was following. He dared not keep close enough to have his quarry in sight; he trailed by the sound of Murphy's steps, and he followed as noiselessly as any bobcat of the swamps.

Murphy made a wide detour, striking for the river

at a point a half-mile below the settlement. Near the river his way led to a copse of tag alders, so tightly grown together that, save for a trail which had been cut through, the thicket was impassable.

At the edge of the tangle Murphy hesitated, fumbled a moment on the trail, then stood before an opening which showed where the tiny path ran through the alders. Twenty feet behind him Gaston crouched low and waited.

Murphy began to whistle softly. From somewhere in the thicket came a single low note in reply. Murphy crashed boldly ahead striking into the path with no effort at concealment, while Gaston, cocking his rifle in the crash of Murphy's first footfall, followed swiftly.

The path ended suddenly in an open space on the bank of the river. Gaston, crawling on hands and knees, was only ten feet behind Murphy as the latter stepped out in the clearing.

Gaston lay tight in the path at the edge of the brush. It was lighter there by the river. He saw that Murphy, with the sack still under his arm, was standing on the brink of the river, where a canoe and paddle lay ready for use. He saw Murphy look around, heard him whistle again.

Then something cried out within Gaston to be on guard. He dropped flat on his face. A revolver spat a streak of flame where his head had been an instant before. He felt a burning sting through his left shoulder, fired at the flash, heard some one grunt, then he was recklessly up and in the open, throwing himself on Murphy as the latter, alarmed, leaped for the canoe.

Murphy was getting away with the money! That was the idea that drove Gaston so carelessly from cover. He grasped the sack with one hand, striking at

Murphy with the rifle, as a second shot flashed from the brush.

The world reeled and leaped drunkenly, and split in a hellish splash of flame and blood. He was down on the ground; Murphy was in the canoe, racing madly down the river. But Gaston thrilled and exulted in the mad tumult of the moment as he realised that the lump he was lying on was Murphy's sack.

Rolling over on his back, he pumped shot after shot into the brush as rapidly as he could work the lever. No shot or cry came back. The bullets ripped harmlessly through the tag alders.

"That —— Indian!" thought Gaston. "No white man could have seen enough to hit me. White man, and I'd have got him."

He heaved himself up, with his eyes running full of blood, and fired wildly down the river after Murphy. The bullet struck a tree on the other side, and he realised that he was shooting across a curve, and that Murphy had disappeared around the bend.

It had all happened within a few seconds, and now there was the sudden quiet that is the aftermath of an explosion. The river brawled steadily as it swept around the curve; save for that the night was quiet, empty.

Gaston's hand went to his forehead, then to the smear that was running down from his left armpit.

"He got me, the dirty Pigeon-Toe," he muttered. "Got me twice, and good—but I got the money."

He staggered a little as he rose, for the blood from both wounds was running strong and free. The sensible thing to do, he knew, was to bandage the wounds at once to stop the bleeding. But there was the chance that the Indian would come back with help; even the men in town might hear the shooting and come down.

Gaston went into the river. The water was mouth

high on him, but with rifle and sack held above his head he waded upstream to open timber, then scrambled out and made his way back to town. The gang was back among the red lights now. Olson's hotel was deserted. Gaston staggered to the door and kicked it open.

"Hale!" he gasped, to the startled Hulda. "Take me to him."

He staggered into the room where Hale was sitting and dropped the sack on the floor before him.

"Money—Rose's," he muttered. "Safe blown—Murphy did it. I saw him. Took it away from him. He's down river—canoe. Ugh!"

The windows of the room shook as he swayed like a sawed pine and went down, the two hundred and twenty pounds of him, with a thump on the floor.

CHAPTER XXIV

A FRESH START

GASTON heard some one speaking when he returned to consciousness. He recognised Dr. Sanders's voice.

"In danger? Seriously wounded? My dear young lady, men builded and grown on the plan of our friend, Thorson, require much more than he got to-night before their earthly existence is even threatened. He's a little weak at present, and he'll have a sore shoulder for a few days, and his open, boyish forehead will always be marred by a scar, but outside of that he's perfectly ready to resume his exciting career. Hello, Thorson—have a nice snooze?"

"Money—money all right?" Gaston muttered sleepily, without opening his eyes, the one thought in his mind.

"Yes, yes!"

He looked up sharply at the new voice. The doctor was slipping out of the door and Rose was standing by his side.

"Why—why did you do it?" she asked tremulously.

Gaston closed his eyes. The vision was too disturbing for a man who had had his skull raked by a bullet.

"Risk your life so recklessly for my money?"

There was so much alarm, so much sternness, and withal so much implied reproof in her tone that Gaston opened his eyes and grinned boyishly.

"Ain't mad, are you?"

She had to laugh with him, though tears and reproving words were not far away.

"How can you joke about it?" she protested. "You might have been killed."

"Might," he agreed. "It was a gamble; that's why it was fun to do it."

"Oh! Please don't make so light of it. It horrifies me. Do you think I would have had you do it—risk your life—if I had known? Not if everything we had was lost. Don't think I'm ungrateful; I can't imagine how I can repay you——"

"Hold on there." Gaston half rose in the bed. "You don't think I did it expecting any pay?"

"No. But I don't see why you should do such things for me—almost a stranger to you. Why, you——"

"I did it. Somebody had to do it; it was something that had to be done. I happened to do it. Let it go at that. Now, there's the way you can pay me—if you insist on paying me: just let it go at that. It's done; it's past. Say no more about it."

"But how can I——"

"I mean that," he said doggedly. "I don't like to hear anything about it. I don't want to be rude, but say, Miss Havens, will you do me a favour?"

"You know I will."

"Well, will you forget everything that has happened up to now? Let it slide. And—can we begin fresh, from now on, to—to get to know each other?"

He was sitting up, leaning toward her eagerly, the impetuous, winning power of youth in his blue eyes and boyish smile; and as she looked at him she trembled a little, with a feeling that when he looked at her like that, in spite of his bandages, she would want to do whatever he wished her to do.

"Begin all over, fresh; you know what I mean, Miss Havens? Will you?"

"Yes," she whispered.

For a moment it was still in the room. Gaston was fumbling for words to utter what was in his mind. Rose nervously turned to go.

"Mother is waiting. I think I—will bid you good night."

"I want you to get to know me differently—and forget the wild, tough kid that I've been," said Gaston, as the words came suddenly.

She smiled gladly. She was very young.

"I shall be glad to—very glad—good-night."

"Good-night."

Gaston lay back with a serious, questioning look on his face.

"I wonder," he mused, "I wonder if I've got the right?"

When Dr. Sanders entered the room, soon after Rose had left, he found his patient sitting up on the edge of the bed, staring out of the window into the black night.

"Back to the hay, boy," commanded the doctor. "You're a bear and a bull for strength, all right, but that hole through the shoulder's from a .44, and there's torn tissue there that needs perfect quiet or there'll be more bleeding. You only lost about a gallon of blood as it was. Lie down, I say. I'm in no mood to trifle with. Hulda's made me go on the wagon. ——! Did you ever notice what influence women have over men in the Spring? So, there you are. Huh! Pulse way up again. You've got to keep quiet I tell you."

"What did Hale do with the money this time, Doc?"

"Hale is at this moment speeding behind his drivers, well on his way to La Croix. Tom Pine, armed to the teeth, sits in the seat beside him. The bag, containing Rose Havens's twenty-five thousand, and incidentally some of Hale's money, is safe between them. And

Hale is driving so hard that there'll be no chance anybody overtaking him before he has that money safe in the bank at La Croix. He decided to take no more chances keeping that much money in this tough town."

"Good. Now, if he could only nail Murphy——"

"Not much chance. I've been hearing some talk about Murphy. He'll never go to La Croix. He's wanted down there. He'll probably leave the river and strike into the woods."

"That's so." Gaston scowled. "Then Taggart's still safe. Well, we made him pay for the logs, anyhow."

"Yep. And I suspect he'll be making somebody else pay for making him pay."

"Oh, sure." Gaston laughed cheerfully. "He'll be on the war-path for my scalp from now on. He told me my only chance was to get out of the country."

"And you decided?"

"Oh, I'm beginning to like this place. It's nice country around here, and the people are friendly. Yes, if there was anything wanting to make me like it it was to have old Taggart or any one else tell me I couldn't stay."

The doctor stroked his beard dubiously.

"Devil Dave won't balk at murder, you know."

"That's understood."

"And he can command any one of a dozen bad men who'd pick you off as quick as they would a deer."

"Sure."

"Taggart'll go war-mad now. He'll make this place harder and rougher than it's been."

"Now, there," said Gaston, smiling, "there you say something important, Doc! Can he keep that up? Can he keep on running this country the way he has? Taggart and his gang are hard and tough. They've

been too tough for you fellows so far. If they make the town any rougher it'll be too rough for decent people to live in. 'Twouldn't be right to go away and leave a fine piece of country like this in the hands of folks like Taggart and his tribe. Might as well have let the Indians have it. It's too good for that; it's too good for anybody but decent white folks, who want to settle down and—make homes.

"And I've been thinking that it's time I got me a home some place, though I don't know if I can stick in one spot. But I want to try. And I like this place; it's the first place I ever camped in that I felt like staying with, and I've got a hunch I'm going to stay.

"Of course I wouldn't care to stay if old Taggart continued to run things so the decent people would have to leave. But Taggart's been driving here, smooth and cocky, for about long enough, it seems to me. He's been sitting back in the wannigan like a king, while his hired men ran his drive over this place, knocking heads under water if they got in the way, and never hitting sandbars or white-water. About long enough. It's time this fine piece of country was settling up, and decent people getting the use of it. It's time for a jam.

"Yes, sir, Doc, I've got a feeling that there's going to be a hard, tight jam about here, with maybe a few fellows getting hurt before she's broken, and when she breaks out, old man Taggart and his outfit, or ourselves will be sluiced down-stream and out of this country for good."

Dr. Sanders knit his brows.

"Hm, hm. I see what you mean. Hm, hm. But you see, Thorson, you'll be the victim Taggart will be laying to put away first of all. You've dared him, and you've beaten him. He won't waste any time getting you—Taggart and his gang. Hm, hm. You'll

have to do some skilful side-stepping to keep yourself—hm, hm—above the young green grass."

"You can't side-step when you're fighting a gang, Doc. They'll be on all sides of you."

"Hm, hm. That's what I say. It'll be hard——"

"So there'd be no use trying to buck Taggart by side-stepping."

"No?"

"No. His gang's too big. But, Doc, did you ever stop to think that there wouldn't be any gang without Taggart?"

"Eh?"

"Taggart's the whole thing. The gang wouldn't be his slaves and so ready to do his dirty work if they weren't sneaks and bums. He picks them that way. He holds something over all of them. They're nothing without him; they'd be afraid to try to rough-house a Sunday-school without Taggart to send 'em on."

"Yes, Taggart's the driving power, of course. Well——"

"Well, when the jam comes, which will be pretty soon, I've got to take a running-jump at them before they get the jump on me."

"How?"

"Get Taggart," murmured Gaston, settling down to sleep. "He's the key-log. Get him, and we'll have the jam broken, and everything here all our own way."

But it was not of Taggart nor of ways and means to combat him that he dreamed that night; it was a girl who smiled, and a home. He did not sleep well. He could not quite see himself in the dream.

CHAPTER XXV

GASTON'S DREAM

HALE and Tom Pine came back from La Croix at noon next day, horses and buggy covered with mud to testify to the speed of their drive through the night.

"I wouldn't have gone with him without waiting to see you come to," explained Tom, "but Doc swore you was still as good as new, and I figgered what you was after was to see that girl's stake cached safe and sound. We figgered we might catch up with that Murphy fellow and have a few words with him for blowing holes in you, but we found where he'd left his canoe in a bend about three miles below. Left it where the river curves into plain sight of the road. He was scairt, all right. We couldn't stop to trail him, with all that money in the buggy. What I don't see is how you got the coin after he'd shot you, 'less you got him, too."

"Murphy didn't shoot me," explained Gaston. "It was that Indian of Taggart's. I could tell by the way he grunted when I winged him. Yes, I touched him up a little, shooting wild in the brush. Murphy let go of the dough in a hurry and jumped for his canoe."

Tom Pine growled reprovingly.

"You ought to be kicked, Gaston Olaf; yes, siree, you ought to be kicked. Why'n Sam Hill did you try for to do it alone? If you'd took me along you'd have gobbled Murphy while I was gobbling the Indian."

"I wasn't after Murphy or the Indian. I was after old Taggart himself. That's why I ought to be kicked; I should have known better than suppose that the old man would be careless enough to come after the coin himself."

Tom's eyes and mouth opened full width.

"D'you mean to say, Gaston Olaf—d'you mean to say old Taggart had a finger in that safe-blowing?"

"Sure. He was the whole thing. He made Murphy do the job. I had a hunch that something was wrong up there at the bayou when Taggart was so free and easy about paying for the logs. When we came to town last night and Doc Sanders hadn't heard anything about Murphy being hurt, I began to know Taggart was cooking up some medicine. I remembered that Murphy was a safe-blower, and when Doc told about the money being put in Hale's safe I was on a warm trail.

"I went down to watch Hale's store alone because I thought Murphy would come and blow the safe and take the stake to the old man. I wanted to nail old Taggart with the stuff on him. You can buy a new pair of shoes and kick me any time you want to, Tom. A kid might have known it wasn't the old man's style to deal first-hand with one of his crooks."

Tom Pine sat silent for a long time.

"That was good trailing, Gaston Olaf."

"But my game got away."

"Yep." Tom was silent a moment. "Yep, he got away. And he's a hard one, with long, sharp claws. What you going to do now, Gaston Olaf?"

"Sit around for a few days until my shoulder heals up. Doctor's orders."

"Yep. I mean, after that?"

Gaston looked out of the opened window. A breeze from the south was blowing, and the air was soft,

piny, redolent with the scent of an awakening Northern Spring.

Outside, the miracle of the last few days was developing. A landscape, which a week before had been a picture of snow, ice and Winter, now proclaimed that the growing season had begun. From where they sat they could see the mighty river racing down from the north, bank-full, swinging around the bend on which the town was located with low-murmured warning of the immense power of its brown waters.

Far away the pines showed blue in the hazy air. Along the river the buds on the willows and alders had begun to swell; the tamaracks in the swamp, a week before brown and dry, were tinted a faint gold; a robin was chirping cheerfully near by, and in a clearing a settler with a pick was assuring himself that the frost had gone out of the ground.

"Tom, it looks pretty good, doesn't it?"

Tom nodded.

"She does, Gaston Olaf, she does for a fact."

There was another space of silence.

"I suppose you're hankering to be travelling, Tom?"

"You ain't heard me say anything lately, have you?"

"But you are?"

Tom Pine looked wistfully off to where the blue pines marked the horizon.

"I tell you how it is, Gaston Olaf: you and me, we're partners, and where you stick I stick. I ain't blind, boy; I can see what's happening. You're going to settle down. All right. I settle down too. If you can do it, I can. We'll see. You can't make a canary bird or a barnyard fowl out of an eagle. That's against nature. But—we'll see. What I mean is, what you going to do about old Taggart? He'll be cooking bad medicine for us, Gaston Olaf. Have you got a scheme to handle the old devil?"

Gaston shook his head. His thoughts had been busy with other schemes, other hopes. How could a man be expected to scheme for battle when he had just begun to dream of a gentler, a sweeter form of life than he had ever imagined? Yet the scheming was necessary. The battle must be fought and won before the dream might be realised. Very well. He would put the dreaming aside for the time being. He was a little too much inclined to dream anyway. The road before him was hard and stern. It would not be enough that he might win over Taggart. He must make something of himself, have something of his own before he would have a right. . . .

"No, I haven't, Tom. We've got to handle him before he handles us, though. I've got a few days here in this room, and I can't think much in here—too much like being in jail. You just lay low for a day or two, Tom. Then we'll go out in the timber some place and cook up a scheme."

"That's good talk," agreed Tom. "A man can't see clear when he's got a roof between him and the sky. Well, I promised Hale I'd rub some liniment on his mare's knees. We hit a windfall in the dark last night."

"What's Hale doing now?"

"Oh, he piked straight up to the girl's to put the receipt for the money safe in her hands."

When Tom had gone, Gaston leaned far out of his window. From there he could see the Havens's front yard, and Rose and Hale were walking toward the gate. At the gate Rose stopped, shading her eyes with her hand. Hale paused, and for a while they stood talking, while a pang shot through Gaston's heart.

Hale fitted into the picture. The steadiness, the stanchness, the quiet determination of the man were obvious in his bearing, in the serious poise of his head

as he listened to Rose's words. And her confidence and trust in him were bespoken in the way in which she looked at him when she spoke.

Gaston drew back from the window, as if discovering himself in a shameful action.

"Hale's all right; he's got a right," he mused. "But if I can make good I'll have a right too, and then——"

The chain of his thoughts shifted abruptly. He sat in a heavy mood.

"I guess—I guess she'd be happy enough with Hale, all right. Well, I won't make her unhappy, no matter what happens to me."

Rose came with her mother to call on him that afternoon, and Gaston, while deprecating cheerfully Mrs. Havens's motherly solicitude over his hurts, watched closely to catch on Rose's face the look of confidence she had bestowed upon Hale. It was not there. But something else was there, something that compensated Gaston for the absence of the other.

Her eyes lighted up at the sight of him as they failed to do at the sight of Hale. When she looked at him there was a look on her face which others never saw. The look thrilled him and made him eager to be out and doing.

That evening when he looked out of his window and saw her raking the leaves from around the lilac bushes in her yard, he threw the doctor's injunctions to the wind. There was a small shed directly under his window, and from the shed it was an easy drop to the ground. So silently and swiftly did he move that he was vaulting over the fence, coming to her side, before she looked up and saw him.

"Mr. Thorson!" she gasped. Then, remonstratingly: "But Dr. Sanders insisted that you be quiet for at least two days more. This is wrong of you; it is reckless. You shouldn't. Why——"

She stopped in confusion, leaning upon the rake in her agitation.

"Just for a minute," he said. "I couldn't stand it any longer in that room. I felt I was in prison."

He looked at her and her eyes went to the ground.

"It's Spring," he laughed. "It's hard to stay indoors in Spring."

She raised her eyes now, looking at him seriously.

"I wonder if you ever are serious in what you say?"

"Serious? You bet." He was serious now. "Why?"

"When people speak seriously they mean what they say."

"Yes. Well?"

"You said you wanted to begin all over, and forget the 'wild, tough kid' that you've been."

"And I do."

"Do you think there is a fair chance to forget when you do wild, reckless things like this?" She slowly resumed her raking. "You—you alarm me when you do things like this. You know that Dr. Sanders wouldn't have ordered you to be quiet unless it was necessary. He knows. You can't go contrary to reason any more than other people without paying for it."

For an instant the old reckless spirit flared within him. It was on the tip of his tongue to speak out boastingly that there was where she was wrong; that because of the way he was made he could do things contrary to reason, things other people might not do, and not pay for them in the least; that he had been doing such things ever since he was grown, and that he had never paid, not once.

But he checked himself. He knew now, on second thought, that he was paying now, that he had paid every time he had dreamed of her and had been unable to fit himself into the picture, and that if he was to have a right to make the dream come true he must

regulate his life so that he would be as other people, people who lived in towns, sanely, ordinarily. For a flash the sense of confinement of the room he had just quitted passed over him; but she was before him, leaning on the rake-handle now, her eyes upturned to him, and for the moment he felt that he could do anything —yes, even live in a house, tractable and contented, all his life—for the sake of the look which she gave to him and him alone.

"You're right," he said contritely. "But you'll be patient with me, won't you? You know I've got a lot to learn."

"Of course I will."

Her eyes rose to his and quickly fell again. She began to rake slowly.

"I want to make good," he said huskily. "Will you be patient with me while I'm trying?"

She nodded, slowly raking the leaves over and over again.

"I believe you can do almost anything if you really want to," she said without looking up. "But please do stop and think when you feel moved to do reckless things."

"I will. I've got nothing to do but sit and think, up in that room."

And far into that night he sat in his room and thought. At last he seemed to see his path of life clear before him. No more reckless roaming—steady work, and a home.

He blew out the light. Before getting into bed he stole a peep out at the star-filled sky. He could hear the river murmuring at the bend, strong, untamed, restless, happy. He leaned on the casing, studying the sky.

By the stars and by the "look" of the woods he knew it to be shortly after midnight. The murmuring

of the river grew more distinct. He could picture the brown water as it swung around the bend. A fine river. He had never travelled it. A man might drop a canoe in below the settlement and it would carry him. . . .

Gaston tore himself away from the window sharply. He laughed at the vagrant straying of his thoughts.

"No more of that, old boy. You're settling down and making a little home. That other's all right for a kid; but work, doing something, a home, that's the thing for a man—for you."

And for the time being he honestly believed that it was so.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE FIRST MARSHAL OF HAVENS FALLS

THE second morning following Dr. Sanders had pronounced Gaston free to resume strenuous activities. Soon after Hale came into the room as Gaston was preparing to quit it.

"A man came up from La Croix last night who'd like to meet you."

"Meet me?" said Gaston. "Who can he be?"

"Jim Lonergan."

Gaston Olaf sat up excitedly.

"What! Old 'Iron Trail' Lonergan!"

He had often heard of that grim, persistent railroad builder, who was thrusting his steel rails into that part of the North wherever he discovered a locality that promised farms, settlements and filled freight-cars. It was said that Lonergan looked at scenery and saw tons of freight per annum. His reputation was one of squareness and success.

"What in the world does he want to meet me for?"

"He'll tell you himself."

Hale stepped out and returned with a stocky, square block of a man, white-haired, round-faced, brick-brown from sun and wind, genial and patient. In the first glimpse Gaston saw a resemblance to Hale, Hale as he might be when he was twenty years older. Following came Dr. Sanders, Perkins, the postmaster, and two other of the decent settlers.

Lonergan looked Gaston over leisurely, nodded, and held out his hand.

"They grow 'em big and wide where you come from, I see," he said. "Now, Hale's been telling me a few things about you, and I'm pretty much inclined to take his word. The question to be answered before we go any farther is: Do you figure on staying put in this country?"

"That's my idea," replied Gaston. "Old Dave Taggart says I can't, but I differ with him there."

"Exactly." Lonergan rubbed his hands together. "Thorson, we need you for marshal of the town of Havens Falls."

Gaston slowly rose to his feet. He was at first moved to break forth into scornful laughter. But Hale and Lonergan were watching him seriously, anxiously. Lonergan went on, swiftly and earnestly:

"We need you, Thorson. You've shown that you're the man we've been praying for. You drop down here like a godsend. You know what a hell-hole this settlement is. You know what a town it ought to be, what the country around ought to be for settlers. We can't open it up the way things are. They've got to be changed. We've been waiting for the right man to come along to help us change them, and now he's come. You say you intend settling down here. Good. Then you owe the settlement a citizen's duty. That duty is to be its first marshal. What do you say?"

"One question," said Gaston suspiciously. "Are you fixing up to make me your gun-expert to shoot off old Taggart legally?"

Lonergan and Hale and the others smiled.

"It'll hardly be necessary to do any shooting—if you're our marshal. Taggart is powerful and dangerous because he has a gang at his beck and call. His gang is dangerous because they know they're safe from the law. Give us a marshal to tame them, and the backbone of the Taggart power is broken. Now, if

you'll pardon me for saying it, Thorson, I've got it figured that you intended to make it a private, personal, old-fashioned affair between yourself and Taggart?"

"Of course. He's threatened to run me out of the country. It's got to be."

"And you'd probably win. We'll admit that you would. And law and order would be just as far away. It would only be another shooting scrape. But—if the marshal of Havens Falls broke up Taggart's gang, the law would be established as something men would respect, the way for the railroad would be cleared, and civilisation would begin to have its inning. Have I made our meaning clear?"

Gaston nodded.

"But what's the use of talking?" he said, turning to Hale. "As I understand it, Taggart's got his own sheriff of the county, and his grip on the courts is too strong for you fellows to break."

"It was until the other day," said Hale.

"How come?"

"It was until the other morning when you took a drive smack away from Taggart's gang."

Lonergan broke into a quiet laugh.

"Big medicine, Thorson, skookum medicine!" he chuckled. "I've been prowling around this bush longer than you've lived, but that's the best I ever heard. As Hale says, Taggart's grip was too strong to be broken up to then. He was the big chief that nothing could touch. But since then—well, I've spread the news to the far corners of the county, and if there's a white man who isn't laughing every time he hears Taggart's name mentioned, there's something wrong with that man sure. No, sir; Dave Taggart isn't the big chief he was. You did more than save those logs for poor old Havens' girl, Thorson, when you did that trick; you got a peavey into the old man, and if we heave

on it hard enough we ought to pry him loose. Come with us, boy. We need you; the town needs you. Well, give us your answer."

"I'll go you," said Gaston. "It's a job that's got to be done."

"Good! You're appointed; that's agreed. We'll have the papers hurried up from La Croix in a day or two."

Lonergan remained while the others departed.

"Can you lay your hands on a few hundred dollars, Thorson?" he asked when they were alone.

Gaston told of the timber claims he and Tom Pine had proved up.

"Sell 'em. Turn 'em into cash. Then buy this forty just back of town. It belongs to me; I'll sell it for whatever you get for your timber."

"That stump land! Why should I buy that?"

"Because that's where the rails of the Havens Falls main line is going to run. Five, ten years from now you can name your own price for town lots. That's going to be your pay for making this place fit for white folks to live in—if you do. A few men who're in on the ground floor are going to get decently rich out of this town site, Thorson," he concluded as he arose. "There's no reason why you shouldn't make yourself the big buck of 'em all."

Gaston, left alone, rubbed his eyes. He went to the window and looked out, and all he saw was Rose Havens's garden. It certainly looked as if his dream might come true. Here was Opportunity. Havens Falls would become a town. He would become one of the big, solid citizens of the town. Then he would have the right——

"Hi! Gaston Olaf, dast I come in?"

Tom Pine's gruff voice brought Gaston out of his reverie. The old man came in with the narrowed eyes

and soft step that told he was keenly on the alert. He looked Gaston over from top to toe.

"Huh!" he snorted. "What you been doing to yourself? You look as solemn and self-satisfied as if you'd got religion."

"I've got a job," said Gaston.

"A job? You bet you have. You've got a job on your hands that it's time you were waking up to."

"I'm the new marshal of Havens Falls."

Tom Pine cackled.

"I jest heard about that. But that ain't the job I'm talking about. While you been talking with the high mucky-mucks I've been doing a little trailing. The war's started, boy. The sheriff's just got into town. He's come to arrest you for shooting one Murphy. Yes, they're keeping the bluff up, and he's getting a small army together down at McCarthy's to come and take you."

Gaston frowned thoughtfully.

"So the old man's started the ball rolling so soon, has he? I thought he'd wait till I was on my pins. Pretty fair scheme. If that sheriff ever got me in his charge I'd never bother Taggart any more."

"You ain't in no fit shape for a battle, Gaston Olaf."

"No, and the time isn't ripe for a battle." His mind was made up. "We're going to sneak. We're going to run away. Go get our rifles, Tom Pine. I'll meet you on the other side of the ridge."

Tom Pine's look betrayed his surprise.

"By the great pike-pole! Gaston Olaf, you're almost getting sense."

While Tom was securing the rifles, Gaston dropped out of the window, slipped unobserved into the timber, and rounded the big ridge back of town. There in a tiny cedar swamp he was soon joined by Tom, who, noting the perfect cover, nodded his approval.

"We can jest lay up here safe as a bear in his den, me going back for chuck after dark, and nobody ever looking for us so close to town."

"Yes, we can, and then we can do something else, too. Did you happen to hear anything about Taggart?"

"Oh, he wasn't in town, of course. I heard that much."

"Of course he wasn't. He wouldn't be anywhere's around while his hired men are putting me out of business. Come on."

"Hah? You ain't going to hit the trail, Gaston?"

"I guess yes. I've got a hunch I know where Taggart is. He's alone in the woods while his gang is in town tending to me. Do you think I'm going to miss such a chance? Come on."

Avoiding the river, the road, trails, clearings, they swung by a roundabout way through the woods toward the camp where they had worked for Taggart. They forded the west branch above the watch-house, then, instead of following the stream, Gaston led the way straight into the woods.

It was in the middle of the afternoon when at last they lay flat-bellied under the brush of a hillside and peered down at the little, hidden clearing with Taggart's strange cottage in the centre. They had found Taggart's trail, and knew he was before them.

For a long time they lay there in silence, making no sound or movement that might betray their presence to some sharp-eyed watcher down below. So far as they could see, the clearing was deserted; the doors and windows of the house were open, and occasionally a sound came floating up, too faint to be distinguished.

"I guess he ain't there," whispered Tom Pine finally. "And if he was, Gaston Olaf, what's your

scheme for handling him? You say you're all for law and order now, and no shooting goes. What then?"

"I'm the marshal of Havens Falls," replied Gaston. "My job is to break up the gang that's making the town a hell-hole. If the gang suddenly wakes up and finds that it hasn't got any Taggart to nerve it up, the job of busting it will be about cut in half."

"So we——"

"We kidnap Taggart and keep him in a nice dry place till the gang's been kicked to pieces and sent floating down-stream."

"All right," Tom Pine nodded quietly. "I ain't surprised at anything you do any more. First we steal a drive, now it's old Devil Dave himself. All right, Gaston Olaf, let's go down and get him."

"We'll wait until dark. We're on his out-trail now, so if he leaves he's got to come this way. No hurry."

CHAPTER XXVII

TAGGART'S CHANCE

WHEN darkness had fallen sufficient to hide their movements, they slipped down to the edge of the clearing. The lamps in the house were lighted, but the curtains were down.

"The old devil isn't taking any chances even out here in the woods," whispered Gaston. "Come on!"

As they moved into the clearing, an owl hooted: "Hoo-hoo-hoo!" from beside the house.

Gaston and Tom crept forward, pushing their rifles before them, until they were within striking distance of the open door. Then at a signal they leaped forward. They were in the doorway, their rifle-muzzles covering the interior; the house was theirs.

"And you wish—gentlemen?"

The dark woman whom Gaston had seen at his previous visit to the house rose from a table; the little blonde looked up, laughing.

"Have some beer?" she tittered, holding forth a glass. "Or some trout? You're just in time for supper."

Gaston looked at the table. It was set for three.

"Where's the old man?" He pointed with the rifle-barrel at the third plate.

"Mina," called the dark woman.

From the kitchen a greasy squaw came forth, and at a signal sat down in the third chair.

"No, you don't," cried Gaston. "There's a bottle of champagne there; you aren't giving champagne to squaws."

"Serve the wine, Mina," said the dark woman.

The squaw obediently drew the cork and poured a glass for each of the women.

"And the third glass—how about that?"

"That's a mistake."

"It is; it gives you away. Tom, you take a look around. I'll watch here."

At the word Tom eagerly stormed through the house. Gaston could mark his progress as he kicked his way from room to room, and searched for hiding-places. In a few minutes he came running back, carrying in his hand Taggart's wide-brimmed hat.

"By the open back window, Gaston Olaf!" he cried. "He was here, but he's gone. This was knocked off his head getting away."

"Hoo-hoo!" hooted the owl outside, now farther away. "Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo!"

Gaston and Tom looked at each other in disgust.

"That darn Injun!" growled Tom. "And men like me'n you couldn't tell the difference! And we didn't have sense enough to look for a trail leading out behind."

"Some wine?" smiled the dark woman, holding forth a glass.

"Or beer?" laughed the blonde. "You ought to get something out of your trip."

Gaston bowed low, cap in hand, in his very best manner.

"I beg your pardon, ladies. It was a bad mistake on our part. We should have watched both sides of the house. You may tell Mr. Taggart that he was too smart for us."

"Sit down," said the dark woman, smiling her best. "There's no use chasing him; he's got away by now. Won't you have some wine?"

"With the little knockout-drops in? No, thanks.

You've already gained a few minutes for Taggart, though. So we must bid you good-bye."

The little blonde made one bid to hold them longer.

"Gee! Big man. I believe I could leave Taggart for you."

"Good-night. I'm sorry——"

He saw that the girl was laughing at something and glanced toward the open window.

Taggart, standing outside, was leaning over the sill, carefully covering Gaston and Tom with a double-barrelled shot-gun. There was no need for speech. Gaston and Tom were too experienced to take chances with such wicked, business-like eyes as gleamed at them over the barrels. It was life or death, the decision to be made in a split second, and they froze stiff, their rifles hanging harmlessly under their arms.

"That's right." Taggart's fangs showed as he smiled. He had been drinking. "A move and—well, we won't speak of what would have happened. The —the tables are slightly turned, aren't they, Thorson? You're not the big man just at present. No, just now you look like an ordinary whipped dog. And, like every dog who gets in my way, you've had your day."

Gaston's eyes looked down the gun-barrel into the eyes of Taggart. There in the terrible, silent conflict of wills the issue was decided.

"Ah, Taggart! You've had your last chance to get me out of your way." Gaston's voice rang with the fibre of triumph. "Pull that trigger. Touch her off. Blow my head off. That's your only chance. And that's gone now. It was gone the second after you got the drop. You could have done it then, while our backs were to you. You can't do it now. Your chance is gone. See? You can't look me in the eye and do it. It isn't in you, Taggart. You're trying,

but it won't work. You're done for. Your chance is gone. I'll drive you out of the country now. Look at his gun wobbling. Look! Look!"

Like a flash he threw himself backward, knocking Tom Pine under him. His long legs flew out, kicking the table smack into the window where Taggart stood.

The shot-gun roared ineffectually. The big kerosene lamp on the table exploded, flirting liquid flame about the room.

There was a hell's medley of flame and screams, of cursing and scrambling, as the women blindly threw themselves about to escape the flames. Tom and Gaston thrust the women to safety through the open door, and, running into the next room, made their escape through a rear window.

"Into the brush!" commanded Gaston. "The Indian's around somewhere. He'll have a shot-gun, too."

From a hiding-place in the brush they looked back at the clearing. The cottage was spouting flame at every window. The clearing was brilliantly illuminated, but the light revealed no trace of Taggart or the women. Apparently they had fled the moment that it was certain that the cottage was doomed, not wishing to be found by any one whom the flames might draw from the woods.

The same thought was in Gaston's mind, and when it became apparent that the danger from Taggart's shot-gun was passed, he caught Tom by the arm and led the way into the timber.

On a ridge a mile away they dropped on the ground and lay looking back. Up in the dark sky hung a red-tinted pall, the reflection of the burning building. In that waste of dead, black forest the scene was appalling, an angry splotch of passion in a sea of peace.

Higher and fiercer rose the flames, licking eagerly at the rich furnishings of the den, and redder and

larger grew the glow in the sky. The fire rose rapidly to its climax, spouted high as the roof fell in, then gradually began to subside, while minute by minute the nightly gloom of the forest crept slowly back to its own.

"Good enough," said Gaston at last. "That's a good sign. Taggart's been burnt out of one of his dirty nests. May the good work go on."

Tom Pine was rubbing his brow in perplexity.

"What happened?" he demanded. "What for did you go to rile him up so sudden, Gaston Olaf? We might 'a' got hurt."

"It was our only chance. We had to rattle him. He got mad; I saw by his eyes that he'd loosened his trigger grip. Then I dropped and kicked the table. I had the thing worked out fine."

"Pretty fine," agreed Tom dubiously. "That's the closest I ever heard buck-shot whistle past this old head. If it had been any finer——"

"I wouldn't have made a move," Gaston laughed. "We certainly didn't come away from there with any credit, Tom. Walked into it with our eyes wide open and blind."

"Ye-es. It wasn't so bad, though; we were able to walk out again. We didn't take anything away, but we didn't leave anything, either. Now, what next?"

"We'll keep on walking. The chances are Taggart'll have his sheriff and posse out here looking for us as soon as he can send 'em word. They'll search this neck of the woods pretty close, and there'll be too many of 'em for us; so we'll travel. Come on!"

He set out, picking his way dexterously through the dark woods, at a good pace, and Tom followed obediently. The course lay straight westward for two miles, to the bank of a small creek running north and south.

"Here's where we lose 'em when they come to follow us," said Gaston, and plunged into the water.

Tom followed. They went down-stream a short distance and came out upon a sandbar, leaving their tracks large and plain, pointing westward.

After losing their trail in a swamp, they re-entered the creek and waded up-stream for half a mile to where a tangled windfall permitted them to quit the stream, on the eastern side, without touching the ground and making tracks. Their course now lay eastward and slightly to the north.

They travelled steadily for most of the night. Shortly before daybreak they searched for and found a small, well-built shanty in the midst of a good growth of timber. Tom Pine laughed as they entered, and, by feeling, found matches where they had left them the day they started for Havens Falls.

"Home again!" he cried.

"Yes," said Gaston. "We'll lay low on our claims here for a couple of days and rest this bum shoulder of mine. We'll hit back to town to be there Saturday night."

"Saturday night? Why then?"

"Because then I figure the pot'll be about due to boil over."

CHAPTER XXVIII

SATURDAY NIGHT

IT was drive-time on the La Croix; it was pay-day for the camps; and it was Saturday night in Havens Falls.

For such nights existed the river-fronts of river towns in the bad old days; on such nights was made the lurid history that is remembered even now, when river towns, as they were, have ceased to exist. Mad, glorious nights after sober days of bone-testing toil!

No one who has seen a river town on such a night will ever forget it, even though the recollection is accompanied by a shudder. Then the men came in off the drive, wet with the water which had snatched at their lives during the day, mad with the hunger for a night's excitement before going back to their toil. Then from out of the woods came the camp-men in bodily condition like unto a prize-fighter in training, mentally akin to bucks in rutting time, prowling about for a chance to fight. There assembled on such occasions dozens of the most daring, reckless, muscular men who ever inhabited this continent. In their pockets they carried money, running often into the hundreds.

To the right and left the red lights blinked, and music tinkled, advertising the things that the river-front had to give in exchange for money. Supply follows the demand. Whisky and women; lights and music; gambling and association with their kind; noise nd strife—these were the things that the excitement-ngry woodsmen craved, and these were the things

that the river-front brazenly announced itself ready to supply.

In a mud-chinked log building, with trees swaying at its back-door, one found a gleaming, polished dance-floor, where, by standing in line, and for a price, one might dance with a tiny blonde, with the features of a Madonna and the eyes of a snake. In the curtained boxes lumber-jacks had the privilege of ordering the same brands of champagne that wine-agents advertise along Broadway.

Old lumber-jacks, mackinawed and shoe-packed, beards reeking with tobacco-juice, but pockets filled with money, staggered about the floor, holding in their arms girls young enough to be their daughters. Young jacks, slim, clean-eyed boys, spent their money on painted things old enough to be their mothers.

Next door one could gamble at anything from chuck-luck to roulette. Any lumber-jack who by accident won a few dollars calculated to hold his winnings by the strength of his good right arm.

But these devices of pleasure were but supplements to whisky. It was the bars over which liquor was served that drew the men and furnished reasons for the other things; and it was in the bare saloons that the greatest crowds were to be found and the most violent actions indulged in.

On this Saturday night, while Gaston and Tom Pine were wending their way to town, there were probably a hundred and fifty men from the woods in Ravens Falls. Jack McCarthy's saloon, being the largest in the settlement, drew the largest part of this number.

McCarthy was experienced in such occasions, and he knew that serious rows were no source of profit to his till. Hence, early in the evening, he seated himself on a stool just inside the door. Twenty-five per cent. of the lumber-jacks came into town bearing rifles.

such a one entered McCarthy's place the proprietor crooked a finger and pointed at a corner behind the bar. The lumber-jack promptly placed his weapon with the others deposited there. There were two-score rifles behind McCarthy's bar that night before the fun had fairly begun.

Gaston and Tom entered the settlement shortly after dark and at once made their way unobserved into Dr. Sanders's back room. The doctor greeted them with great surprise and greater relief.

"Boys—boys! I'd almost lost hope of seeing you again."

"Why so?"

"For good and sufficient reasons. First, because of the way you disappeared without leaving any word. That worried me, but I figured you might have done that for a reason. But when the sheriff and his gang went hunting you——"

"Oh! They did hunt for us, then?"

"Hunt for you! Boys, they certainly did. They made a sudden raid on the hotel, surrounded it and forced their way in. You were gone. As near as I could figure it you'd been gone about twenty minutes when the raid came. Then they searched the town. They——"

"Did they go up there?" Gaston nodded in the direction of the Havens home.

"They did. Miss Rose invited the sheriff to go through and see that you weren't hiding there. She told him you wouldn't hide from a man like him. Yes, they went through the whole town.

"Then that night they got word and went into the bush after you. I heard that they'd heard where you were. Then they came back and said they'd run you out of the country, and, boys, I was—hm, hm—I was afraid they'd caught you and put you out of business.

And, say, somebody else was worrying, too, and I think you ought to show yourself up there as soon as you can."

"All right. And what's happened since then?"

"Oh, the sheriff and most of his gang have gone back to La Croix. But the crowd that's in town to-night—hm, hm—there'll be Billy the Devil to pay before morning."

"What's up?"

"Well, the crew that you took the drive away from has been trying to clean out the town. The rest of the men have been giving them the laugh. There are a lot of men in town who haven't any use for Taggart, although they've been in his camps. There's the crew from Camp One, forty men or more, just paid off. They've heard about what you did to that drive, and Taggart can't show himself without getting the merry ha-ha! There have been half a dozen small riots already. Taggart's bullies have been trying to choke off the fellows who dare to talk about how you took the drive."

"Have they been able to do it?" asked Gaston with great interest.

"Not much! There are too many of the other fellows. But the bullies have turned to this end of town. Red Shirt Murphy knocked a kid down and robbed him across the street there just a few minutes ago."

"Red Shirt, eh? And Taggart—what's he up to?"

"Hm, hm. He's keeping himself hidden. But—whisper—the old man's been drinking his head off these last two days, and he's egging his bullies on."

"Fine!" laughed Gaston.

"What?"

"Fine! Then the chances are that old Davy will try to do something to-night to still the laughter and make

people remember that he's still the boss man along the La Croix."

"That's just how we figure it."

"And Red Shirt Murphy has committed a crime. Were there any witnesses?"

"Half a dozen."

"Fine again. I'm Marshal of Havens Falls; it's my duty to arrest any one who commits a crime. Murphy will be the first victim of Law and Order in Havens Falls."

"Man, dear! On a night like this——"

"Just the time. The way to break a jam is to break her when she's keyed up tightest."

He moved toward the door, the rear door, for the time to reveal himself to the settlement had not arrived.

"You wait here for me a few minutes, Tom," he said easily.

"Nix. You don't go leaving me out of any of this fun," protested Tom.

"The fun doesn't start just yet. I've—I've got something else to do just now."

"Yes—hm, hm," said the doctor. "She'll be glad to see that you're back."

Gaston went directly to the Havens house. It was a warm, dark night, and in his rubber-bottomed shoes he made no more noise than a cat as he came swiftly up to the door. The door was open, as was a window at one side.

The front room was brightly lighted and Gaston could not help looking in, and, having looked, could not help hearing what was being said. It halted him, and he stood looking and listening.

Hale was in the room with Rose and Mrs. Havens. Hale was on his feet, speaking, and his sober, round face wore a look of worry.

"I think you ought to go. If I had the power I would make you go. This is no time for you to stay here."

"Are you going away, too?" asked Rose.

"Of course not. That's different. But there's no reason why you should stay. We can't tell what they'll do before morning. I'll give you my team and a driver and you can go down to La Croix and wait until the thing blows over."

Rose smiled.

"If you will drive us, Dick——"

"Oh, you know I can't do that. A man can't run away."

"But a woman—a girl—can?"

"Certainly. That's common sense."

"We're going to stay here, Dick." Rose was very quiet. "I know how well you mean it—but we will not run away."

"Bravo!" cried Gaston, striding in. They started at the sight of him; but Gaston looked only at Rose, and his heart swelled at the look she gave him. "I apologise for hearing what wasn't intended for my ears. I was just coming in. Miss Havens, with you here we know we must keep Taggart's outfit away from this end of town; and if we must, we can."

He laughed as he spoke. His spirits were at top crest. The situation, the opportunity to fight to protect Rose, was like wine to his blood. It lifted him, made his heart beat madly. He felt strong enough to fight the world; he had a mad impulse to go forth singing, to battle single-handed with the gang in its lairs.

And then he remembered. Those mad, joyous, impractical impulses and actions were no longer for him. That was past. For him, sober, respectable, practical effort.

He heaved a sigh as he noted that Rose's eyes were

comparing him to Hale. The comparison scarcely could be favourable to him, he knew. His fringed buckskin trousers, high-top rubbers, flaming red sash and carelessly buttoned shirt were in dire contrast to Hale's neat store-clothes. In the woods, the odds would have been in his favour; here it was obviously Hale who had the better of it.

As they questioned him about his absence and return, Gaston made a mental note that he would change to "town clothes" as soon as the opportunity offered. And then he must hold himself in, must suppress those reckless impulses, and make himself into a regular respectable citizen.

"I can win her," whispered his keen instinct. "But I've got to tame myself—I've got to quiet down."

As a beginning he reconsidered his words concerning Hale's suggestion that Rose and her mother leave town.

"Perhaps it would be the right thing to do," he suggested; but Rose laughed at his sudden change of front.

"If we had decided to stay before you were here, certainly we won't change our minds now that you've come."

"Well," said Gaston dubiously, "I don't know. It's always best to be safe, and you'd surely be safer down at La Croix than you are here."

Rose thanked him with a look.

"I'm very glad to hear you talk in that tone," she said, "but I'm sure you don't really think there's any danger to us here. Do you?"

"As Hale says, you'd surely be safe in La Croix," he replied evasively.

"But as you said, since we're going to stay here, we'll be assured safety. So here we stay."

Hale presently excused himself.

"I want to see Lonergan," he explained.

"Hello!" exclaimed Gaston. "Lonergan here?"

"Yes. He's here with half-a-dozen men. He's preparing to lay out his line between La Croix and here."

"That will help. That means seven more men on our side."

"Yes. Good men, too. I must tell Lonergan you're back in town."

Gaston left the house soon after Hale, and Rose followed him to the gate.

"Well," he said in parting, "you see I'm living up to my promise to change my ways. I ran away and hid when the sheriff's gang was after me, and I've been avoiding trouble ever since."

"I am glad," she said.

"So am I. I'm glad that—that you wanted me to change."

Without thinking what he did, his fingers strayed down and reached her hand. But at the thrill that went through them both at the touch, he came to himself and drew his hand away. He had no right to do that, or think of it—yet.

"Good-night," he said suddenly. "I must go."

"Promise me you'll be careful this evening? That you won't do anything—wild?"

"Nothing wild," he said solemnly. "That's all over. I'll prove to you that it is. Don't you believe it is?"

"I hope—yes. I believe it is. Good-night."

"Good-night, and—I'll remember."

He meant it. He really felt that he was tamed. But he was soon to learn how badly he was mistaken.

CHAPTER XXIX

A FIGHT

AS Gaston went back toward Dr. Sanders's office there came up from the river-front a muffled roar of rage and disappointment that froze him in his tracks, and he stood looking down toward where men surged wildly to and fro in the gleam of the lights from opened windows and doors. Something had happened down there that had brought sudden anger to a large number of the crowd.

The shouting came from one of the larger saloons, and after the first sudden explosion of anger there followed an insistent clamour, apparently for revenge.

Ever since he had heard from Dr. Sanders that a large percentage of the men in town were laughing at Taggart and his gang, and that the gang was growling over it, Gaston had been imbued with a wild hope: if the two elements would get to fighting each other, the gang would be too busy to turn seriously on the decent people of the town. He had just promised Rose that he would be careful; and to stand to one side and let the two sides fight among themselves was the height of caution.

At first he had planned to go down and arrest Red Shirt Murphy before the eyes of his friends, casting the challenge of law and order in their teeth. But this would inevitably have precipitated a conflict between the gang and the decent citizens. So now as he moved alone down toward the river-front, without

troubling to call for Tom, it was in his mind only to conduct a secret scouting expedition and ascertain, if possible, whether there was a prospect that the two elements in the crowd would clash in battle. If so, he and the other respectable citizens of Havens Falls had only to hold themselves to their upper part of town and pray that the outsiders would lick Taggart's men to the last whisper.

In this cautious frame of mind, Gaston, aided by the dark night, soon was mingling with the crowd before the building whence came the clamour.

"What's the row here, neighbour?" he asked, keeping his face averted from the stranger whom he addressed.

"Oh, he just knocked another of our boys colder'n a dead fish," was the nonchalant reply.

"Who did?" asked Gaston carelessly.

Before his informant could reply there came a shout from the doorway.

"Gangway there—gangway! Open up, so he can get some air."

Shouldering and cursing, their faces cold and ugly with rage, came two middle-aged woodsmen dragging between them the limp, bloody figure of a curly-headed youth. The boy was nearly as big as Gaston. The two men carried him, each holding him up by the arms, his head rolling drunkenly, his feet dragging helplessly on the ground. His face was smashed red and raw, and there was a cruel gash in the back of his head. Outside the crowd, which only glanced at him and turned away to view what was going on in the saloon, they laid him down and splashed water in his face. There were half a dozen in the circle about him, tried, hard-bitten men of the woods, and Gaston saw that they were all strangers to him.

"He's got his gloves loaded," muttered the battered

youth, as consciousness returned. "I tell you there's lead in those gloves of his."

"Shut up!" commanded one of the men who had carried him out. "Doesn't make any difference if there was dynamite in 'em; we said we could find a man to lick him. Boys," he turned to the little group, "how about it? Are we going to let that darn prize-fighter brag about licking three of our boys without anybody getting him?"

"Lemme go back at him!" pleaded the youth. "I was half stewed when I got into the ring with him. Head's cleared now; I can handle him now, boys."

"You can't handle yourself—lay down! You handled your mitts like a Swede."

"We got to get him licked," growled another man. "We can't hold up our heads if we don't."

Gaston's blood leaped quickly. Forgotten was the new policy of caution. Here was a chance to win Crew One as his devoted followers!

"Well, rustle around," continued the spokesman. "Get some one. Who can we get? Tim Blake, he's licked, and Big Robideau, and—Erik here."

"Them's the best men from our crew."

"Well, somebody else, then. Holy, suffering Moses! Anybody. Let's go hunt for some one."

They started back toward the crowd.

"Hold on, boys."

They swung back. Gaston had stepped out of the darkness and was standing beside the fallen youth. With one glance of their sharp eyes those woodsmen appraised him. Then they came toward him, respectfully, eagerly.

"What's going on, boys?" asked Gaston. "Some champion in town?"

They looked him over in silence.

"Stranger," exploded their spokesman, "can you handle your mitts at all?"

"Have done so," replied Gaston. "What's up?"

"A knocker-out in Sam's place. A professional. Bets any amount he can knock out any man in two rounds. He's cleaned three of our boys so far."

"Where you from, neighbour?" queried another voice.

"Don't make no difference where he's from," cried the spokesman. "Question is: will you take a whirl at this loud guy?"

"Oh, I don't mind," said Gaston.

"Then he's one of our crew—Crew One—no matter where he's from. Come on. Gangway there, you town hoboes. We got a man to clean your champion now. Come on, boys!"

Gaston paused to bend over the battered youth.

"How did he give you that clip in the back of the head, boy?" he asked.

"Loaded gloves, I tell you," insisted the boy. "I can tell when lead hits me, can't I?"

"Lead nothing," said some one. "He lets you feel of his gloves. But he strikes an awful blow, stranger. The boys have dropped like they was shot."

"All right."

They were at the doorway of the saloon now. The place was crowded with men. At the farther end of the room was a tiny stage, on which usually singers and dancers held forth. To-night two ropes were stretched across the front of the stage. The two side walls and a canvas drop at the back constituted the other three sides of the ring.

Through the haze of tobacco-smoke, which hung like clouds about the hanging oil-lamps, Gaston could make out the figure of the fighter leaning over the ropes,

gloves on his hands, sneering at the crowd, while at his side a hawk-nosed gambler cried:

"Come on, boys; bring up your fighting men! Even money, any amount; you haven't got a man can stay two three-minute rounds with the 'Butcher Boy.' He only weighs a hundred sixty-five, boys. Come on, some of you fire-eaters; get the easy money."

Gaston looked over the crowd first of all. He recognized here and there one of Taggart's men, Red Shirt Murphy among them, but to his satisfaction he saw that more than half of the men were strangers to him. They were the outsiders, the men who had laughed at Taggart because of the trick of the stolen drive, and just at present they were begging for somebody to step up and knock that guy's block off.

The men who were to be counted as Taggart's were with the pugilist. It was their turn to laugh now, and they were taunting the outsiders with the failure of their would-be champions.

"Get a good man!" they sneered. "What's the matter, Crew One? Haven't you got one good man among you?"

The air of the room was heavy with tension. The outsiders were taking these taunts in ominous silence.

Gaston looked at the prize-fighter last of all. The man was of medium height with enormous neck and shoulders and a small shaved head. His thick, gnarled arms and bowed legs told of great strength, but it seemed rather the slow, heavy strength of the wrestler than the speed and power of the pugilist.

"What's the matter? Haven't you got a good man?" howled the fighter's partisans.

"You darn know it!" came back the reply from the door, and Gaston Olaf and his six new-found friends came rushing down the room to the ring.

In a vague, far-away sort of fashion Gaston Olaf

realised that he had taken upon himself a desperate venture. A small, still voice was whispering to him that this was a dangerous thing to do; that Taggart's men would recognise him; that they would seek to collect the price which he knew Taggart must have set on his head.

But the voice was so small that he scarcely heard it; the realisation of danger came to him from far away and as through a fog. What he realised keenly was that his veins were throbbing with excitement. And now under the spur of the moment he realised that this was what his nature craved above all things, that he had stepped into his present dangerous position because his real nature had led him to it.

These thoughts came and went in one troubled flash. Then he was the old reckless, dare-devil Gaston, glorying in the power of his young giant's body, thrilled to the core by the prospect of the fight ahead of him. He laughed boyishly; he was happy.

There was a moment of stillness as he climbed through the ropes. Taggart's men, recognising him, were awed to silence by his audacity at appearing in such a place. Then the outsiders broke into a whoop and crowded forward, clamouring to bet what remained of their rolls on this new champion.

The pugilist looked Gaston over with a horrible grimace, intended for a smile of contempt.

"Deh bigger dey are, deh harder dey fall," he barked. "Give 'im deh mitts, ref'ree. He's in fer an orful tumble, dis guy is. Here, feel o' my gloves, so yah won't holler dere's lead in 'em when I knock yah cold."

Gaston felt of the thin gloves. There was no hard substance in them.

"Here's yours."

The gambler, acting as referee, tossed him a pair of

thin gloves similar to the pugilist's. Gaston was puzzled at the obvious confidence of the professional and the gambler. By their faces the fight was only a formality; it was as good as over, with him as another victim of the pug's prowess. Why was this? His keenly alert instinct suddenly cried out a warning. There was something wrong here; he must be on guard against a trick.

"Come on!" bellowed the gambler. "Anybody else want to back the big fellow against the little Butcher Boy?"

Gaston, leaning against the ropes in his corner, was watching the crowd. He saw Red Shirt Murphy whispering with another man.

"Come on!" he cried. "Let's get started."

"Hi! D'you know who that big stiff is?" cried the man to whom Murphy had spoken.

"Don't know and don't care," replied the fighter.

"That's Thorson—that's the guy who stole the drive!"

The room was still for an instant. Then Gaston's backers lifted the roof with their shout.

"Hoop la! Thorson! Bully boy! Clean him up like you cleaned Devil Dave. Eat 'im alive!"

The pugilist grinned, and the gambler looked bored. It was apparent that they cared not in the least about who Gaston was; all comers looked alike to them. What could the trick be that made them so confident?

Gaston looked swiftly around the ring. The ropes in front were all right; there could be no trick there. The sides were bare walls, all right. The rear was a sheet of canvas——

Gaston felt a slight chill along his spine and his breath came sharply. There were two tiny holes cut in the curtain, so tiny that in the poor light it required eyes as sharp as his to see them. And for a

flash as he looked, then instantly disappearing, there showed behind each hole a watching eye.

"Something wrong behind that curtain," Gaston mused. "I'll keep away from it."

His thrill at the prospect of combat suddenly changed and gave place to a cold, seething rage. They would try an unfair trick on him, would they! His jaw set and his eyes flashed fire.

"Come on, you cheap, dirty crook!" he hissed. "I'll spoil your circus and break your head besides."

"No more bets? All bets on?"

"Our money's all up. Kill him, Thorson, eat him alive!"

"Knock him cold, Butcher Boy!" roared Red Shirt. "Then we'll give it to him right."

"Go!" shouted the gambler, and leaped from the ring.

The crowd surged forward, packing tightly against the ropes. Gaston had a flash of the first row, and, seeing half a dozen of Taggart's men there, knew that more trouble awaited him when the fight was over.

He had little time to think of this. The fighter came at him like a whirlwind. It was only a feint. Gaston led, the pug ducked, and Gaston suddenly found himself clinched and shoved toward the curtain. He broke the clinch without any trouble.

The fighter feinted and clinched again. This time he had a hold about the middle. With a heave he lifted Gaston from the floor and rushed him against the canvas hanging. Gaston threw himself forward even as his back touched the curtain and in that instant the secret of the fighter's success was revealed to him. A blow as from an axe took him on one side of the neck, but his forward movement had taken him too far away to permit the blow to land with full force. As it was it knocked him to his knees. Stars flew around

his head; he felt nauseated, for a moment. And then he was on his feet, with a Berserk bellow of rage.

The pug struck wildly, right and left, and turned and ran. Gaston caught him at the ropes. He grappled him neck and thigh and swung him over his head, roaring deep down in his chest. Without a flicker of hesitation the gambler reached for his gun, only to be dropped by the fists of two Crew One men who had been watching him for just such action.

Gaston steadied himself with the squirming man held above his head. It was a good ten feet across the ring. Gaston hurled his victim straight through the air into the canvas. The curtain ripped and came down, and the two black-jack men behind it were exposed with their weapons in their hands.

"There!" cried Gaston. "There's why your men lost, boys!"

CHAPTER XXX

THE COMING OF LAW AND ORDER

IT took them a few seconds to realise what had happened. Was it possible? Had these town crooks really had the nerve to play such a trick on Crew One? For a moment they gaped; then they swore softly and swarmed toward the ring. A number of the gangsters made the mistake of trying to halt them and hold them back.

"Hoop la!" cried the woodsmen, and the room full of men exploded in battle royal.

The small ring became a place where a dozen men were struggling instead of two. Down on the floor two-score men met fist to fist. The outsiders were in the majority, and they were out to avenge the unfair tactics by which their men had been beaten, the taunts hurled at them, and the temporary loss of their money —temporary because four of them stripped the gambler down to the last yellow diamond on his fingers.

In the ring Gaston fought furiously against odds until the rush of his friends carried his foes underfoot. He was marked, but he soon was satisfied with his share of the struggle, and he managed to free himself for a moment from the press.

The outsiders by this time had the whip-hand and the fight had become knock-down-and-drag-out. Taggart's gangsters were being hurled through doors and windows. Later they would return with reinforcements and the battle would be renewed, but for the time being the fight was all to Crew One.

It was no part of Gaston's programme to take part in a general rough-house. He realised how greatly fortune had favoured him in his desperate venture, and returning calmness dictated that he escape. In a jam near the door he caught sight of the flaming upper garment of Red Shirt Murphy.

Murphy was cornered by two young lumber-jacks who were polishing him off to the queen's taste. A smile flitted over Gaston's face, and he dropped into the mêlée on the floor. It was the work of a few seconds to work his way through to the door.

"Let him go, boys," he commanded, clutching Murphy's arm. "He's my meat."

"All right, champeen," they said, and turned to hunt a fresh victim.

"Leggo me!" growled Murphy. "Hey, Taggart's men, here's Thorson. Knife him, somebody, knife the——!"

Gaston twisted his arm behind him and thrust him outside. Two of Murphy's friends came running toward him.

"Out of the way," said Gaston. "I'm arresting Murphy for robbing that kid this evening. I'm marshal of this town. Pretty soon I'll come back and get some more of you. Out of the way. Hike!"

At a dog-trot he propelled Murphy ahead of him out of the crowd and up the street, before any one dared to make a move. The amazed gangsters stood dumfounded while Gaston ran his prisoner across the open space separating the two parts of town. He was in front of Hale's store before they moved. Then they shouted:

"Hi! Thorson's gobbled Red Shirt and's carrying him off. Come here to me. We got to get Red Shirt away."

Gaston threw his prisoner into Hale's store. Hale,

Tom Pine, Dr. Sanders, Lonergan and six of his men, old Perkins, the postmaster, and a few others, were assembled there.

"Here's the first prisoner of the first marshal of Havens Falls," announced Gaston. "Law and order has come, gentlemen. Guard him carefully. I'll be back in a minute."

He snatched his rifle from Tom Pine's hand and was outside and half-way back toward the red lights by the time Murphy's friends had gathered courage to follow. There were probably a dozen of them, and they came cursing up the street, demanding Gaston's life, and the freedom of Murphy.

Where the light from a window streaked across the street Gaston drew a line in the sand with the toe of his shoe, and slung his rifle into the hollow of his arm.

"Here's where you fellows stop—right at this line," he said quietly. "First one across it gets what's in the old gun. Who wants it first?"

The gang stopped short. In the yellow flare of light Gaston was not a pleasant object to face. There was blood on his face from the fight; his shirt was torn in several places; his thick crop of hair was disordered till each hair seemed to be standing on end. And in the half-light his blue eyes gleamed wickedly.

He was very serious. There was no joy of battle about this. This was business, duty. It was something that had to be done, and he happened to be the man on whom the job of doing it had fallen.

"There's the line," he said. "That's the line that marks the coming of law and order to Havens Falls. You fellows have done just as you please up to now. You can't do that any more. Things have changed. I've been made marshal of this town. I'm here to tell you fellows your day of being top-loaders here is

over. Understand? From now on I'll tell you what you can do and what you can't do in this town. And first of all you can't come up into this part of town. You can't cross that line. Do you understand?"

Gaston sensed that people were moving toward him from behind. He looked and saw that in the darkness at his back a crowd had gathered to his support. Nearest him were Tom Pine, Lonergan and Hale. Each of them was armed with a shot-gun.

Dr. Sanders, Perkins, Lonergan's men and others were there, too, bringing the total number up to ten, all armed. They came silently, stretching across the street in a ragged line. It was a new business to most of them; their faces were white and they were breathing hard. But within them was the spirit of the town-makers, the men of homes, who bring order into the wilderness.

This was something that had to be done for the good of the town. Before them were the forces of lawlessness and disorder, from which they and theirs had suffered helplessly for so long. Behind them were their homes, their women, their children—all that was sacred in the world to them. And the time had come for them to stand out between these and the forces of evil.

They didn't like to do it; fighting wasn't in their line. But it had to be done. So they were doing it. And Taggart's gangsters looked at the silent line of white faces, and the formidable figure that led them, and grew weak. As always, the bravado courage of the bad man was as the recklessness of a boy in the face of the calm determination of law-abiding citizens defending their homes.

The two sides faced each other in silence; then Gaston's voice:

"Now toddle back to your boss. Tell him what's

happened. Tell him this rule has come to stay. You fellows can't come up into this part of town any more. Then round up all of your gang and see if you can scare up nerve enough to come back and cross that line."

Then the tension broke. The gangsters began to slink back one by one. They went with curses on their lips. A dozen yards away they stopped and put their heads together.

"We'll come back, all right," growled one of them, as they continued their retreat. "And when we come, you fellows'll be glad to get out of town alive."

CHAPTER XXXI

TAGGART'S DEFIANCE

GASTON turned about and faced the posse which had assembled to his support. He did not laugh at the threat which had been hurled at them. The mood of recklessness had passed; he was as coldly serious and determined as the most sober citizen present.

"Well, we've served notice on them now," he said quietly.

His eyes ran swiftly up and down the line and suddenly he was filled with a great pride at the thought of being chosen leader by such men. With the exception of Tom Pine and a couple of reckless youngsters in Lonergan's crew, the business in hand was appalling to his followers. They were not men of violence; they were men with a hunger for orderly communities. Some of them actually were sick at stomach from the unaccustomed sensations of the situation. Yet not one of them but plainly told by the look on his face that he was ready to stand up and give life itself if necessary in order that the new rule of law and order might be established.

To Gaston, who always deprecated his own courage because the prospect of trouble only filled him with joy, there was something heroic in the courage of these quiet citizens. He saw them in a new light—especially Hale. Hale was handling his shot-gun clumsily, but his eyes were as steady as Gaston's, or Tom Pine's.

"Yes," said Lonergan, "we've served 'em notice. Now they've either got to pull their steel or back down."

"They won't back down," said Hale. "Taggart won't let 'em."

"Nope." Old Perkins was nervously chewing tobacco. "Nope, they won't back down."

"Neither will we," said another man.

"No," they said, almost as one.

"What did you do with Murphy?" asked Gaston.

"Put him in a shack back of the postoffice with two men to guard him."

They stood looking down toward the red lights. It was quiet down there, but Gaston knew what trouble was boiling and doubts assailed him as he considered the possible results to these men.

"Have I done right, boys?" he asked.

"You've done right."

"I've brought trouble coming to you."

"It had to come sometime. Better now than later."

"All right. They won't be back here for a little time at least. Let's go to Hale's store and decide what to do."

In the light of the store-lamps they saw the blood on his face.

"Hey!" cried Dr. Sanders. "I knew there'd be work for me to-night, but I didn't think it would start so soon. How'd you get that? Come here while I fix you up. Who gave it to you?"

Gaston opened his mouth to tell of the fight in the saloon, but stopped. Looking back upon it, he saw suddenly how desperate and reckless had been his adventure. In the same instant he remembered how, but a short time ago, he had promised to be careful this night. He felt ashamed.

"Murphy's friends," he replied evasively, bending

over the basin which the doctor had brought. "It doesn't amount to anything."

"Amounts to this," snapped Tom Pine, "you sneaked off and hogged the fun after promising to let me in on it."

"Don't worry; there'll be plenty more fun before this night's over. Now, let's put our heads together. I've arrested Murphy. He's our first prisoner. Those fellows will be after him, sure as we're living.

"Murphy's nothing but a big bum, and the best thing to do with him is to kick him out of town; but for the present he's important. We've got to keep him as a warning to 'em. So I guess there won't be much sleep for any of us to-night. Those fellows will try to nose around and find out where we've got him. We've got to meet them at that line out there and persuade 'em to keep on their own side of the fence."

"Right. You're the boss; give your orders."

"Well, I think this store is a good place for us to make camp in," said Gaston. "How many more men can we get together that we can depend upon?"

A silence fell over the room. Hale broke it.

"Counting the two men guarding Murphy, we're most of us here. There's three or four men more will be here later. Then there are some away who won't be back to-night. Count on an even dozen."

"A dozen?" repeated Gaston cheerfully. "Well, we'll have to make that do, then. We'll——"

"You'll raise ——, you will!"

A voice in the doorway brought the last man of them to his feet.

"You'll raise —— and put a foundation under it, you will!"

Taggart was standing there, his bulk filling the doorway. He was all alone. He was stiff-eyed from whisky; his fang-like teeth showed through his ragged

beard in a leering grin; and he stood leaning forward, his huge hands curved before him like claws.

The sudden sight of him sent a chill down the back of most of those present. They realised fully now what they had to combat.

"Hello, Taggart," said Gaston easily. "Where's your shot-gun?"

Taggart's head dropped further forward, his grin grew wider, and if ever eyes flashed fire his blood-shot optics did then.

"Thorson, if I was bothering about you any more I'd have brought a shot-gun," he said thickly. "But you're—you're only one dog in a flock now, one cur in a crowd! And I've decided to whip the whole lot of you out of my country. Do you hear?" His voice suddenly rose to a demoniacal shout that shook the lamps under the ceiling. "The whole lot of you, curs —dogs, bitches, pups! Yes, and your kennels, too. You're all going together. Back up Thorson, will you? Follow him because he's dared to buck me, eh? Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha! Buck me!"

He paused.

"Buck me?" he repeated in a whisper, his face swelling horribly. Suddenly he swept his arm before him as if brushing something out of his way, and stepped back a step. "All of you—whipped dogs—get away. Take your women and kids and travel. For there'll be no kennels for you to bed down in when daylight comes in the morning!"

He was gone, lurching back out of sight in the darkness as suddenly as he had come.

The men in the store looked at one another. Old Perkins's shrill treble rose:

"Well, the dirty ——!"

Then they all looked at Gaston. The doctor had halted in the act of putting sticking-plaster on a cut on

his cheek, and Gaston was calmly completing the operation.

"Well—darn it, Doc, this stuff won't stick. Well, boys, now Devil Dave has served notice on us."

There was no reply; they were watching him. By his calmness they sensed that he was confident that the solution of their problem lay with him.

"Wha—what did he mean?" gasped a white-faced man.

"Mean?" said Gaston. "Huh! That's easy; he means that he's going to burn the town!"

CHAPTER XXXII

THE POWER OF WOMAN

A MOMENT of horror-stricken silence followed Gaston's words.

"Well, the dirty ——!" repeated old Perkins.

"Burn us out? Good God! He wouldn't dare do that!"

"You saw him, didn't you?" said Gaston. "Did he look like a man who'd stop at anything?"

Lonergan shook his head.

"He'll do it—if he can. He's done things like it before."

Tom Pine cleared his throat noisily.

"I could have shot him right where he stood," he said, puzzled. "I had my gun right here. And I was thinking: 'You crooked old whelp, I'll do one good thing in this world and rid it of you.' But I couldn't do it. Darn your law and order; it's making me soft, too."

"Well?" demanded Perkins. "What are we going to do now?"

"Keep him from doing it."

Gaston looked his men over. There would be twelve of them all told. Taggart would have fifty. Gaston moved swiftly toward the door.

"Boys, there aren't enough of us," he said sharply. "We couldn't possibly keep 'em from getting fires started. Everything is dry as kindling. If a fire once gets hold here now, everything goes. So we've got to keep 'em from getting started. To do that we've got

to have more men. And—you fellows stay right here. I'm going out and try to get 'em."

Tom Pine made to rise, but Gaston was away on the run. He knew that he must act and get results swiftly if at all. And as he ran by a roundabout way for Sam's place he shook his head at the queer turn of events. For if he was to save Havens Falls he must do it because of his carelessness.

Gaston knew lumber-jacks. He knew that the men whose champion he had been and for whom he had exposed the methods of the crooked pugilist, were, for the evening at least, his sworn friends. They would have liked nothing better than to hoist him on their shoulders, parade the town with him, fill him up on all the liquors that the place afforded. Could he halt them in their wild career of the evening and turn their hero-worship to serious ends?

He approached Sam's place cautiously, keeping in the dark. Inside the outsiders were holding sway. The saloon-keeper, eager for their patronage now that they had their money back, had helped them kick fighter, gambler and knockout-men into the street, and the place was in their hands.

Gaston waited until one of the older men who first had spoken to him came out for a moment's air. Him he caught by the arm and drew to one side out of the light.

"My name's McKenzie, boy," insisted the man, "and I'm going to buy you a drink or——"

"All right, McKenzie—but not just now. I need friends."

"Put 'er there!" cried McKenzie, shaking hands. "Now, lead the way."

"I need a lot of friends. This is serious, McKenzie. It's life or death for me—and possibly some men and women and children."

McKenzie sobered immediately.

"There's forty men in our crew," he said. "After that fight we're with you to a man."

"Well, for God's sake, McKenzie, round 'em up! Tell 'em it's against that gang. If they're white men tell 'em this is the time to show it. Pass the word on the quiet, and get 'em up to the big store—Hale's store—as soon as you can. And you can promise them a fight that will make anything they've ever been in look foolish. Do this now, if you want to square up for that fight."

" 'Nough said. I was their foreman all Winter. I'll have 'em there in a hurry, or I'm a Swede."

Gaston hurried back to the store. Three more scared-looking but determined men had joined the crowd, so there now were fifteen decent citizens to oppose Taggart's gang. Gaston looked them over and sucked in his lips. He had just seen the river-front swarming with the gangsters. Fifty of them there would be, and they were a tough, hard-bitten crew. Futile to oppose them with these soft-muscled townsmen. If McKenzie's men failed him——

"They're coming!" came the shout from outside.

"Hoop-la!"

The first of McKenzie's crew came tumbling into the room, half a dozen of them, with big Erik in the lead. They swarmed around Gaston Olaf, thrusting the others aside. One man held toward him a roll of bills; two held forth bottles.

"There's your share of the winnings, ol' bear. We chipped in. Take it. We won on you. Take a drink, too."

Gaston drank sparingly from each bottle and accepted the bills. They would have taken it as an insult had he refused.

"Now that's all the booze we'll touch for the pres-

ent, boys," said he. "And this roll will pay for a little celebration afterward."

Chaffing them, shaking the hands that were outstretched to him, laughing heartily as they smote him affectionately on the back and called him endearing and profane names, he received them as they came tumbling into the store. They were eager to come, eager to shake his hand. The man who had stolen the Taggart drive, and on top of that given them sweet revenge on the slugger, was for this night their hero, their great man of the world. On the other hand, they were in town to celebrate, and this store and this crowd looked like a mighty dry place.

"Where's the excitement, Thorson?" they cried. "Stir 'er up! This looks too much like church for us."

When McKenzie came hurrying in at the head of a dozen men, bringing the number of his crew present up to thirty, Gaston held up his hand for silence.

"Boys," he began seriously, "we want you to join us; we need your help!"

"Who's 'we'?" demanded a voice.

"Don't make no difference who't is," snapped McKenzie. "There's a man we owe our shirts to. You listen to him."

"The gang that's been bucking you fellows all evening is fixing to burn this end of town," continued Gaston. He talked swiftly, for he saw that this sober sort of meeting was not to the taste of the joyous lumber-jacks, and he feared he might lose his hold. "That gang is Taggart's. You know how they've run things around here. This end of town is where the white people live in this settlement. There are women and babies in these houses, boys; and that gang is fixing to burn 'em out. If we're white men we can't stand by and see that done. We need you boys with us; we aren't enough to protect those women and kids with-

out you. What do you say? Are you white men? Will you stick with us and keep that gang from getting up into this end of town?"

By the silence that followed his speech Gaston knew the men were not won. Like wild, unbroken colts the lumber-jacks were balking. Had he gaily placed himself at their head and led them to clean out a saloon, they would have followed without a moment's hesitation. But they balked at this sober appeal for help to guard the houses of townspeople against fire.

"Where the —— is the fun in that?" growled one. "Come on; let's go back and get a drink."

"Go ahead!" cried Gaston, flaring angrily. "Go get your drink; you probably wouldn't be any good anyhow."

"Don't tear your shirt, Noisy," spoke McKenzie, his hand on the man's shoulder. "Stay right here. But, lemme tell you, Thorson, this isn't exactly what we were looking for."

"Afraid?"

"Come off, man; don't get on your horse just because we don't fall over ourselves to go with you. There's some of us with women and kids, too; and we got a living for them on Taggart's pay roll. There'd be no more work in this country for a man who bucked Taggart's gang too hard."

At this Lonergan thrust his square figure beside Gaston.

"Well, well, if it ain't Old Iron Trail!" greeted an old jack. "Speak up, Lonergan; talk's cheap."

"Not the kind of talk I'm going to make," retorted Lonergan. "You know who I am, don't you, boys?"

"Sure. He's the man who grows railroads. Spit it out, old hoss."

Lonergan turned toward McKenzie.

"You said there'd be no work in this country for a

man who bucked Taggart too hard. You're wrong. That's just the kind of man who'll be able to find work right here—as much as he wants—at better wages than Taggart pays. In fact, I'm up here to hire men. Next week we're going to start blazing the trail for the line from LaCroix up here. I'll need axe-men, shovellers, skinners, drivers, spikers, cooks, water-boys, walking-bosses—there'll be two crews. The logging's over for this season. How about a steady job for all Spring and Summer? And the boys who get on my pay roll will be the ones who help us to-night."

"That goes!" cried McKenzie. "I play with you."

Together with a few of the older men he pressed forward toward Lonergan. But the young fellows, the bulk of the crew, stood still. The idea of providing themselves with further employment was farthest of all from their minds just then. The future might take care of itself; in the meantime, furious, thoughtless excitement was what they craved. This thing was too orderly, too sober for them.

"To —— with a job!" laughed one. "Our money's still good."

"But don't forget who saved it for you," shouted McKenzie.

"To ——! We ain't playing police for no man's town. Come on, boys; this ain't no fun."

"Then go!" Gaston's voice vibrated with anger, though from the first he had feared just such a turn. "And when we've won this fight alone we'll make you fellows take the tall timber on the run."

They laughed and started for the door, wild colts that would not be haltered. And then they stopped.

"Has anything happened; is any one hurt?"

Gaston and Hale started as one and looked at each other at the sound of the new voice. It was Rose. She came running in; and the men made way for her.

Inside the door she paused, panting, her hands on her breast, and looked around.

"Oh!" Her eyes fell on Gaston, and despite the plaster on his face, she gave an exclamation of relief. Then on Hale, and she grew quiet. "I saw the crowd; I was afraid some one had been hurt. But—I'm mistaken?"

"Nobody hurt, Miss Rose." Dr. Sanders tried to say it jauntily, but it was a miserable failure.

Hale looked steadily at the floor; Gaston looked over her head. Neither cared to meet her inquiring eyes. Nor did Lonergan, or Tom, or the doctor. But the lumber-jacks of Crew One were staring at her as at a vision, and the light of wickedness went out of many eyes and gave place to something better. They looked at her worshipfully.

She was dressed in a gown of soft whiteness, and her face was alight with the light of a mother-heart, stirred with alarm. To those rough boy-men she was more than merely a dainty and beautiful girl. She was the eternal dream woman which men of their ilk dream of and are prepared to worship.

Their caps came off unconsciously. They grew sober.

Rose looked at the serious faces of the townsmen and tried in vain to catch Gaston's eye.

"Nobody hurt at all," said he airily. "Just a little meeting."

"What is it?" she whispered. "Is anything going—to—happen?"

"No, no!" he said.

"Dick!" she cried to Hale.

"No, no. Everything's all right. You—you had better go home."

She looked around. She couldn't understand. There was something behind the faces which she had

learned to know so well. She looked at Lonergan, at Tom Pine, at Dr. Sanders. She turned and looked at the men of Crew One.

"Boys!" she cried to them. "You'll tell me, I know —is anything going to happen?"

There was a moment of silence. Crew One began to smile. Then came the reply, bellowed earnestly from a huge pair of lungs—from the man who had said, "This ain't no fun":

"Not by a da—! Excuse me, lady. I mean, no, sir! No, siree, ma'am; there ain't nothing going to happen. No, by Godfrey! Not enough—not enough to fry a six-inch trout at!"

And Crew One shouted as one man to back him up.

"That's right, lady, you bet your bottom boots!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

BATTLE

GASTON, watching the faces of the men, whispered sharply to Hale:

"Take her home. Get her away from here."

He would have given much to accompany her home himself, but his place just then was with Crew One.

Rose's eyes grew soft at the sudden heart-felt tribute which had been given her. She held forth her hands to them in a gesture of fraternity.

"Thank you, boys, thank you!" she murmured. "Yes, Dick; I know. I'll go home."

They watched her go out, watched her cap in hand, watched till the last glimpse of her was lost in the darkness.

"Well," said Gaston, "you discovered you were white men, after all, did you?"

They came swarming back to him. They were eager to make amends, eager to do something ferocious to prove that they meant what they had said.

"Say, Husk, we didn't understand," they shouted. They held forth their hands. "How the —— could we understand? You know what kind of women we'd been seeing in this burg. By Godfrey! That's a thoroughbred little lady. Come on, Big Fellow, shake hands. We're all white men together now. Now we know what you're standing up for, Thorson. Lead the way. We'll go to —— for you now."

"All right, boys. I knew you were white men if it was put up to you right." Gaston leaned over to

Lonergan. "Lonergan, take all your men who've got guns and scatter them in a straight line across the town right here. You've enough that nobody can slip through without being seen. If any Taggart man gets through, fire a shot. They may go into the timber and try to sneak in and fire her from behind. When Hale comes back better have him and a couple others keep moving through this end of town on the lookout. Better go at once."

"Right. Come on, boys."

Lonergan led the posse of citizens out into the night. Tom Pine remained behind.

"All right, Tom," said Gaston. "Put your rifle down. You can go with us. Now, boys, a couple of you slip down and see if the gang is bunched up any place."

Two youngsters ran out eagerly. They were back in ten minutes, their number increased to a dozen by members of Crew One whom they had picked up.

"They're just leaving McCarthy's place," was the report. "They're coming this way."

"Fine!" cried Gaston. "Boys, I promised you a fight. Roll up your sleeves and spit on your hands. We've got to clean up that gang to-night, and the way to lick a man is to get right at him."

In two great leaps he was at the door.

"Can we handle 'em?" he cried.

"Let us at 'em!"

"Then come a-running!" yelled Gaston, and on the dead run he led his men out of the store, and straight at the black mass which was coming up the street.

Taggart's gang stopped suddenly at the line which Gaston had drawn across the street. They stopped in surprise.

They had come on Taggart's orders, expecting to

find a dozen townsmen in Hale's store. Half a dozen carried shot-guns. Their plan was to trap the men in the store, hold them helpless at gun-muzzles and fire the town at their leisure. They had even come prepared to shoot and shoot quickly at any movement of weapons on the part of their opponents.

But what they found was considerably different from what they had expected.

Down the street at them came hurtling a crowd of yelling men as large as their own. With Gaston at their head, with their biggest men at his sides, Crew One just then was terrible to behold.

Gaston had thrown off all self-restraint. For the time he had gone berserk, throwing himself headlong at the enemy, thinking not and caring not that they might be armed, eager only to come to grips, confident that nothing could stop his rush.

His fury had communicated itself to his followers. Thoughts of danger, impulses of fear, were for the time being non-existent for them. Shot-guns, eh? All right; a few of them might go down; but they would follow the big fellow through that crowd and back again, trampling the guts out of 'em, if they never did anything else in the world.

The gun men hesitated. Their only chance was to have shot instantly, without hesitation, as at a leaping lynx. Ere they could think they were lost.

Gaston knocked up the first gun and struck the gang like a maddened bull, his men at his side. In a flash the gun men were down, their weapons gone.

"Fight! —— you, fight!"

Taggart's voice rose from the rear, the roar of a drunken animal.

"Fight, —— you, fight!" echoed Gaston mockingly.

The gang stiffened at Taggart's command. The two sides met with a thud. Groans followed; curses

and screams drowned the sound of blows. Over it all rose Gaston's laughter.

"Come on, boys—right through 'em! We'll get Devil Dave himself."

A few knives flashed among the gangsters. The glint of steel drove the lumber-jacks mad. They were not to be stopped. For a minute, possibly, Taggart's men held. Then with a shout Gaston broke through with a dozen men; and the fight was won.

"Clean 'em! Hold 'em, boys! Don't let 'em run!"

Crew One was just beginning to fight. Gaston and his dozen saw that Taggart had disappeared, and threw themselves back on the gang.

"That's the stuff, boys. Don't let 'em run."

But the gang, suddenly feeling itself surrounded, broke away. They began to run to both sides of the street.

"Don't let 'em get away!" rose the cry. "They used knives. Hold 'em back."

The fight became a rout. The gangsters ran in all directions. After them went the lumber-jacks.

The battle spread to the timber on either side of town. It raged steadily down toward the red-lights. It swept into the saloons and out again. Gaston led wherever a group of the gangsters made a stand. In his hand he carried as a bludgeon the barrels of a shot-gun—the stock he had smashed on a gun-man's head—and at the sight of him the gangsters turned and ran.

"Shoot him, shoot that ——!" they cried.

But nobody found time to shoot. It was a rush that would not be stayed. The den-keepers hastily locked and barred their doors and Taggart's men found hiding-places denied them. Down through the river-front swept the pursuit. It ended at the darkness along the river, and Gaston and his men paused

and drew breath. There was no one left for them to fight.

"Hoop-la!" The lumber-jacks danced jigs and shouted. "Bring on your tigers; we eat 'em alive."

His face alight with triumph, Gaston turned to look back. His jaw fell in horror.

"Good God, boys! Look! They've done it after all."

Up the street, in the upper part of town, a sweep of flame was rushing toward the sky. In the madness of the fight no man of them had turned to note what was going on behind them. Now the whole settlement was lurid under the rapidly rising wall of flame, and the roar and crackle of it reached even down to the river.

"Good God! That must be Hale's store." Gaston's voice was a hoarse whisper. "And if it is the whole street'll go."

He started back toward the flames on a run, followed by his men.

It was not Hale's store that was burning, but the building next to it. This was used as a livery-barn, and stood wall to wall with Hale's building. The barn already was a furnace, too hot to approach. From its dry shingle roof flakes of flame were flying about.

Thus far Hale's building, larger and higher than the barn, was serving as a bulwark, shielding the rest of the settlement from the flying embers. If the store went the way of the barn, it would fire the rest of the street. Olson's Hotel, with tar paper on the walls, stood directly across the street from it; Dr. Sanders's little office was at its side.

From these points the flames could reach out and touch the other buildings, each of which, built of pine and tinder-dry, was like kindling awaiting the match. Nothing is as helpless as a new woods-town when a

fire starts in dry weather. Usually there is but one thing to do—move out and watch it burn.

Dr. Sanders was bending over a man of Crew One who lay in the street when Gaston arrived before the burning building.

"Well, Big Fellow, Taggart stole a march when you were rushing his gang," he greeted. "He and Indian Charley sneaked around back of the barn at the height of the mêlée. Had a can of oil and threw it on the hay. This boy here saw 'em and jumped 'em just as Taggart struck a match. They didn't quite kill him, but the Indian gave him a little steel between the ribs all right. The barn was one flame in two minutes."

Under Hale's direction men were carrying cases of dynamite from the store to a safe place in the woods. Other men were salvaging the stock while some were climbing to the roof to beat out the flames as they fell. The heat from the burning barn prevented any attempt at working on it.

Hale came out and sized up the situation carefully.

"We've got to start a water line," shouted Gaston. "If we get buckets enough we can wet your building down and save it."

Hale suddenly looked up at his roof. He shook his head.

"Can't do it," he said. "Look."

The roof and the side wall nearest the barn had caught. The shingles were beginning to burn, and dabs of flame began to fall from them.

"Ladders! Get some ladders!" cried Gaston. "It isn't too late yet. We've got men enough here to save her."

A burning shingle, spewed upward by the force of the flames, floated through the darkness above them and landed gracefully on the stoop of Olson's Hotel.

"You see? Too late," said Hale. He looked long

at the big, stanch building in which was a good share of all he possessed, and once more shook his head. "We haven't even got time to get the stock out. Bill," he called quietly to one of his men, "go out and bring back one case of the dynamite, will you?"

"Man!" cried Gaston. "Don't do that yet. Let's try first——"

A second flaming shingle sailed high over the street, dropped, and was stamped out beside the papered wall of the hotel.

"I wouldn't have those poor women burned out just to try to save my store, Thorson. What do you think would happen if my roof began to flame?"

Gaston made no reply.

"It's the only thing to do," said Hale. "Don't you see it is?"

Gaston bowed his head silently. The man had returned, bearing a heavy box of explosive.

"Clear out, boys," cried Hale. "Get away out of danger. We've got to blow her up."

A groan and a sigh of relief came from the crowd. They regretted the destruction of the building and yet they realised that by it the town would be saved.

"Fill up your buckets. Scatter yourselves around ready to put out flying brands. And get out of the way when the shot comes."

The crowd drew back until Hale, Gaston and Tom Pine were alone before the burning building.

"All right; no use delaying it," said Hale, and the three men moved to their work.

Gaston and Tom Pine salvaged stock after the charges had been laid and the fuses lighted. At the last moment they rushed out with armfuls of goods to join Hale, who had sought shelter behind the hotel.

"There she goes!" groaned Tom Pine as the building rose in the air at the explosion.

Gaston vented a curse from the bottom of his chest. The store had fallen together like a house of cards. The barn fell with it, and there remained of it only a low pile of jumbled lumber, which burned without offering any danger to the other buildings of the town.

Hale wiped his lips with his fingers.

"Well," he said steadily, "we did a good job of that."

A small form in white came running toward them. It was Rose.

"Oh, Dick! Your store—how did it happen?"

"There was dynamite in it—it just blew up," replied Hale.

Her eyes fell on Gaston. Even in the half-darkness he saw the light that leapt into them, but he looked away, as if it was something he had no right to see.

"Oh, Gaston! I've heard how you saved us——"

"Don't," he cried hoarsely. "There's the man who did it—Hale. His store didn't just blow up. He blew it up himself, when there might have been a chance to save it, because he was too big a man to risk others' property to save his own."

And he hurried back to where men with buckets were splashing the fringes of the dying fire.

CHAPTER XXXIV

GASTON BUYS STORE CLOTHES

OF all the wild nights that Havens Falls had known, that was the wildest. For when Crew One calmed down sufficient to count noses, it found that three more of its members had suffered knife-wounds fully as serious as those of the man who had tried to prevent Taggart from firing the barn.

Only one result could follow this discovery. The lumber-jacks went on the warpath for revenge. Nothing could stop them. Gaston knew the breed too well to try. Before the fire had burned down to embers they were back in the river front, red-eyed with hate and fury, roaring their intentions to revenge the boys who had been stabbed.

"Where's Devil Dave? Where's that —— Indian?" they demanded. "We'll show 'em it's dangerous to knife boys from Camp One."

Naturally, neither Taggart nor the Indian was to be found. The jacks began hunting for other victims. These, likewise, were hard to find.

Most of the gang had gone into hiding. Such as had the hardihood to remain in the saloons also had the cunning to conceal the fact that they had taken any share in the struggle. At rare intervals one of them was recognised, then there was a beating and a scurry, and only the strength of arm of the cooler men prevented a lynching.

Soon the river-front was cleared of every one who might be considered a fair object for vengeance. The

tension lessened. Men began to laugh and slap one another on the back. The fighting was over; now to celebrate it. Crew One rushed up to the bars and set in to get truly good and drunk.

A few of the older men, McKenzie leading them, held back. They even sought to urge moderation upon the others. As well seek to whistle down a storm. McKenzie and his kind, seeing the uselessness of remonstrance, went up to the hotel and went to bed, while the victorious lumber-jacks, freed of all restraint, proceeded to make the night terrible. They drank like madmen; they howled like the bob-cats and wolves of the forest, and they danced.

Gradually these effervescences ceased. The dancing and shouting ceased; the affair degenerated into a frightful drinking contest. They did not move from the bars. Standing stiffly, leaning lazily, or hanging on with both hands, they stayed by the rude counters, drinking as often as a glass was set before them. Presently the weaker ones began to fall away; the floor became littered with them; they lay outside sleeping. The terrible liquor of the river-front laid most of them low, but when daylight appeared it found a few, stiff-eyed and sleepy, hanging on to a bar with one hand while with the other they carried liquor to their already burnt-out throats.

In the upper part of town there was peace and quiet, though few slept. Gaston organised the men in watches, and himself kept circling the town all night. With the woods full of gangsters there was constant danger that one of them would attempt to sneak forth and start a new fire. It was even possible that Taggart might round them up and make another rush.

When daylight appeared it found Gaston swinging briskly around on the patrol which had occupied him throughout the night. A feeling of bitterness and de-

feat came to him as the rising sun revealed the smoking ruins of Hale's store and the barn.

The charred timbers seemed to grin at him, reminding him that, in spite of the overwhelming support of Crew One, Taggart had managed to make good a small part of his threat.

"I broke up the gang, but I didn't get the old man," mused Gaston. "Devil Dave is still fighting, and there'll be more of this to come."

The store was a total loss. Of the large, diversified stock which had filled it, a scant tenth, possibly, had been saved. As Gaston contemplated what was left, he forgot Taggart and a thrill ran through him at the memory of Hale's splendid action in the crisis.

"He's a man," he said aloud. "Yep; he's a real man."

He laughed swiftly as he considered how Taggart's coup had failed, after all.

"Taggart set out to hurt Hale by burning him out. He burned his store, all right, but he didn't hurt him. Not much! He gave him a chance to show what was in him. And he's such a quiet, modest little fellow you'd never suspect him of being that big unless he had a chance like this. Now he's had his chance. Everybody knows what he's made of. People'll be talking of this for years to come. They'll look up to Hale, and he deserves it. He'll be one of the biggest men around here, which he is. Ha! And Taggart gave him his chance. The laugh's on Taggart, after all."

Thus mused Gaston as, in the first rays of the rising sun, he marched up and down the street. He had seen a fellow-man put to the test and meet the test in glorious fashion, and he was glowing with appreciation.

His own actions of the night he sincerely consid-

ered as nothing in comparison. He had merely led in a terrific fight, and he was one of those who begin to hear sweet music instead of the voice of fear at the approach of trouble. He considered that he deserved no credit. Had he been completely successful against Taggart he might have been inclined to strut a little. But he had not been that, quite. The blackened timbers were reminders that Taggart was not defeated.

"And there'll be no end of this trouble till the old man himself is licked."

His march had led him to beyond the post-office at this moment. He stopped and looked around.

The rays of the morning sun, topping the eastern hills, was lighting up the front of the Havens home, directly before him. Gaston smiled. The house was very pretty to his eyes in the morning light. Apparently its occupants were sleeping soundly. He thought of Rose as he had left her with Hale last night, and he was glad he had left them and had told the truth about Hale's store. The better man must win. It must be a fair game. If Hale was the man for her, all right.

He recalled the look she had given him. Her face, upturned to him, seemed to be before him. He grew thoughtful. Could he make her happy, a woman like her? Was he the man for her?

He looked down at himself and felt abashed. His shirt was torn into strips, and through openings were to be seen cuts and bruises. He looked at his hands; his knuckles were raw, and his right thumb was swollen and discoloured. There was blood on his red sash and buckskin trousers. No; he was scarcely the sort of specimen to go wooing a girl like Rose.

Gaston waited until smoke began to appear from chimneys and the town began to stir. Then he went

to the house of the owner of the settlement's clothing store and dragged him forth.

"Hello!" cried the man. "Just in time for breakfast."

"Thanks. Don't want any breakfast," retorted Gaston. "Come with me to your store. I want a new outfit."

"Something like what you've got on, I s'pose?" said the merchant, when they reached the store.

"No, siree, pop!" was the emphatic reply. "Nothing at all like what I've got on. I want—I want some regular store clothes."

There was difficulty in fitting him. His huge shoulders cracked wide open the first coat he tried on. At last an outfit was assembled. He also purchased a shaving equipment and towels.

"Now you'll come back and have breakfast with us?" insisted the storekeeper.

Gaston excused himself. He had something else to do.

With his new clothing under his arm, he slipped out of town and went down the river till he found a deep, clear pool. The sun was tinting the stream, and in the pool the water was like a mirror. Kneeling on the bank, Gaston leaned over and studied his reflection in the water. He grinned at what he saw.

"You certainly are hard-looking this morning, boy," he chuckled, "but so long as you didn't get your eyes blacked you can fix yourself up."

With the pool as his mirror he shaved carefully. Next he stripped and stood poised for an instant in the sunlight, a figure for a sculptor to marvel at.

Into the ice-cold water he dove with scarcely a splash, and when he came leaping out to rub himself down he was rosy. He dressed himself in new apparel from feet to head and stretched himself gin-

gerly, feeling cramped and confined at every joint.

He was now arrayed in a sober suit of blue, a soft, white shirt with a loose collar, solid leather shoes, and a soft, black hat. The coat pinched him under the arms and, rubbers and moccasins being his accustomed footwear, the shoes felt stiff and heavy on his feet.

With a sigh he tossed his old, torn shirt out into the current and watched it float down-stream. The buckskin trousers, sash, cap and rubber "high-tops" were about to follow, but he checked himself. When he presented himself at the room which he and Tom had taken at the hotel, these articles were under his arm.

Tom looked up at his entrance and laughed uproariously.

"What in Sam Hill, Gaston Olaf? You—you got religion?"

"Oh, no," said Gaston, tossing his old clothes into a corner; "I just wanted to find out how town-clothes feel."

"Well, how about it; how do they feel?"

"Oh," with a tug at his collar, "I suppose a man can get used to anything."

CHAPTER XXXV

A QUIET SUNDAY

AFTER the turbulent Saturday night, Sunday came quiet and peaceful, the calm succeeding the storm It was the first orderly Sunday in the history of Havens Falls. True, a few of the celebrating lumberjacks upon awakening sought the bars and attempted to resuscitate the corpse of last night's orgy, but the attempt fell flat.

Most of the men, in their own words, had "got enough to last." Some staggered up to the hotel to sleep off the ravages of their celebration; others sought shelter in the woods for the same purpose.

A pall hung over the river-front. The bars were nearly deserted. Where a group was assembled there was no noise. Something new had come to the Settlement which made itself felt even in the foulest corner of the worst den in the front—law and order, civilisation.

In a vague, stupid sort of way the gangsters realised the coming of these new forces. That crude line, drawn by Gaston's foot across the street, was like a wall unto them. They scowled and cursed, but they made no more ebullient statements that the town was theirs, to do with as they pleased. They had read the writing on the wall and were troubled.

Taggart and Indian Charley had disappeared immediately after firing the barn.

"He looked like he needed a sleep," chuckled Tom

Pine. "When he's slept the liquor out of his head he'll probably come back."

"Yes," said Gaston, "he'll come back sure."

For the present, however, there was nothing to cast a shadow over Havens Falls. The day was a warm, sunny day in Spring; the world was covered with new green things; hundreds of birds sang in the trees; and it was Sunday.

True, there were the ruins of Hale's store and the barn to remind of what had taken place the night before. But Havens Falls was young, and recovered rapidly, and by noon those same ruins were things to joke over while wondering if the trout wouldn't soon begin biting. There were picnic parties up on the big hill, and rowing parties up the river.

Dr. Sanders and Hulda paddled down-stream in a birch-bark canoe. When they returned, Hulda had promised that if he would stop drinking so much whisky she would marry him as soon as they could get a house. It was Hale's canoe that they paddled in. Hale had no time to go canoeing that Sunday. He and Lonergan were busy hiring men and planning to build up a new store.

In the middle of the bright afternoon Gaston gave way to the desire that had tugged at his heart all morning, and sought out Rose. He found her starting up the hill toward the picnic party, and she stood stock still and marvelled at the change in his attire.

"Well," he laughed, "do I look civilised?"

"Yes," she said seriously, and paused.

"Even if I don't act that way, yet?" he suggested.

"No. I wasn't going to say that," was her grave reply. "I have heard the men talking about you. They say that the only reason why you were able to save the town was that—that you had acted so—so daringly——"

"Recklessly!" he interposed.

"Early in the evening. It isn't for me to judge you. Naturally I thought it was strange for you to do such a thing immediately after you had promised me that you'd be careful. But men say it was fine and big—your fighting; that you are a great man. I suppose you are a judge of what was necessary to save the town. You did save us, anyhow, I know," she concluded, "and—and you do look civilised now."

"I am glad of that," he said gravely. "I want to be civilised. I want to settle down. But men are wrong when they say that fighting was fine and big. It wasn't. It was fool recklessness. It turned out lucky, though, for the town, and the people, and everything about it, and I'm glad of that."

They were half-way up the ridge now, and they stopped and looked back. Below them the town and its environs lay like a green map. There lay the settlement on its flat in the river bend, a peerless town-site. Through it curved the rushing La Croix, lending virility and force to the scene.

On all hands stretched the fat farming land, waiting only the plough of the breaker. The birch gleamed white through the green note of Spring. It was a good country; it fairly smiled in the warm afternoon sunlight.

"Look at it!" cried Gaston, his out-door senses thrilled by the scene. "Isn't it enough to make a man want to throw off his coat and dig in to help make it fit for folks to live in? Look at that flat along the river—miles and miles of it! Think of what a lot of young couples can find homes and farms on that! Look at the power in that river! Can't you see mills and wood-factories along it?

"And there's the little town. When I look at it, I don't see those little shacks down there; I see a

street with brick buildings—stores, banks, everything, and churches, and schools, and fine homes. Down there's where the depot will be, and the trains'll come swinging around that hog-yard back yonder. And preachers, and school-teachers, and all those kind of people, will come riding in on the train, and the folks who marry will have a chance to educate their kids right here. It's a dream, I know, but this dream certainly is coming true."

She cried out, clapping her hands in delight at the picture he had drawn.

"Oh, Gaston! To think there's all that in you!"

He turned to her swiftly, a hungry look at the corners of his mouth.

"Rose—Rose, there's many sorts of things in me. More than I know myself, perhaps. Most of what's come out so far has been the rough, wild part——"

"No, sir! Don't you say that. I owe you too much to permit it. It's been fine—much of it."

"Well, if there is anything fine in me, and if it has shown, it's been because of——"

He checked himself suddenly. He looked away, out over the town.

"Rose," he resumed quietly, "every man—every white man—wants the fine in him to come out, if it's in him. I want it. I don't know whether it's there or not. Sometimes I'm afraid it's not. A man will be what his nature makes him. But—Rose," he broke off suddenly, "are you engaged to Hale?"

"No." She was cruelly agitated. "He is my best friend."

"He's a brick! But—nothing else?"

"No."

He tore the top off a pine-bush and crushed it in his hands.

"Rose, tell me honestly," he pleaded frankly, "what do you think of me?"

"What do I—think of you?" She grasped his arm, drawing him around so he must meet her eyes. "How can you ask me that, when you've done what you have for me?"

"No, no! Not that. You know what I mean."

Slowly she let go of his arm, and slowly her eyes went to the ground.

"Oh, Gaston, Gaston!" she stammered. "You charm me, you thrill me. You seem to warm me and waken me when you come near me, like the morning sun, or like a fresh south wind in Spring. Yes, you're like that. Your smile is like the sun to me, really. There's something in me that leaps up and makes me want to —to go to you. But there's something about you that —that frightens me, too. I don't know what it is. Oh, please, please, let's go on up to the others."

"You bet," he said, and promptly began to help her up the hill toward the picnic party. "But—have I got a chance?"

She did not reply. Her eyes rose and met his and fell again. And he knew that he could win her; that if he persisted she would come to love him; that he could make her his own.

CHAPTER XXXVI

SETTLING DOWN

FROM that moment he gravely set to work to make himself fit to have the right to claim her. He realised that he had a difficult task before him. There was Hale, and Hale was in love with her, and would make her the kind of husband she deserved.

She would marry Hale, Gaston knew, if it were not for himself. And she would be happy with Hale, too. So he had no right to think of winning her unless he could make sure that he would be as good a husband as Hale. That was his task now: to be the kind of a man who was fit to marry Rose Havens. It would be a hard pull; but he had done many hard things, and his confidence in himself was unbounded. So he set to work.

His first move was to call on Jack McCarthy in the latter's place that evening. He had selected McCarthy as the strong man of the river-front. McCarthy greeted him quietly and thrust forth a bottle and two glasses. Gaston pushed them back.

"I'll have a little water, Jack."

Without a word McCarthy filled two glasses with water.

"Here's how," said he. "Now—shoot."

"For a start," began Gaston, "you know I've got no hard feelings against you. You're in this business, and that's all right. But I've been elected to keep order in this town, and that's my business. You're the

leader down here, and that's why I'm talking to you. The wild days are over in this town. Pin that up over your register and remember it. This gang down here doesn't run Havens Falls any longer. We've got the whip-hand up in the other end of town, and we've decided to make the place decent. We aren't going to interfere with you unless you interfere with us. There's a line up there in the street. You fellows keep this side of it!

"Don't think I'm just talking. It's serious. You fellows might tear loose and lick us once. But we're here to stay. You can pass the word to the gang that their day's over. This is your side of the line; but don't let things get so wild that they spill over on us. If you do, somebody will have to leave town—and we're high man. I'm telling you this to avoid trouble."

McCarthy nodded.

"I've seen it coming," he said. "I'm getting ready to move."

Later that night Gaston took Red Shirt Murphy a mile down the river road and pointed down-stream.

"Good-bye, Murphy," he said. "You've had your day in Havens Falls, but you're leaving now. Don't come back. It wouldn't be healthy. Lynching's too good for a man who'll rob a kid; here's what you deserve—Hike!"

Red Shirt's teeth rattled as Gaston's right foot lifted him in the air. The erstwhile bad man picked himself up hurriedly. Gaston was settling himself for another kick; Murphy put his head down and ran, out of sight, and out of Havens Falls.

Next, Gaston placed the deeds for his own and Tom Pine's timber claim in Lonergan's hands. The railroad man added the land to the holdings of his company. A few days later he returned from La Croix with deeds conveying to the two partners the

parcel of land which he had directed Gaston to secure in Havens Falls.

"Now I feel sure of you," said Lonergan, when the last details of the transfer were completed. "You'll stick now."

"What's that?"

"I say you'll stick here now. Was afraid you'd quit us and go wandering. Don't want you to do it. We need you right here. Feel sure of you now; a man usually sticks in the spot where he's got property."

Tom Pine grumbled as he studied the deeds.

"Town property," he growled. "What have I got to do with things like that? A piece of timber-land, that's all right. A man can build his shack and camp on it if he wants to. But I ain't no town real estater, Gaston Olaf, you know that."

"You can sell out pretty soon and get enough to buy all the timber-land you want," replied Gaston. "This is our chance to make a stake."

Tom thought it over for a while.

"Yep; that's all right for you, Gaston Olaf—to make a stake," he muttered. "But for me, after it's made, what am I going to do with it?"

Nevertheless Tom Pine followed his leader's example, and, apparently, was resolved upon settling down and becoming a permanent resident of Havens Falls. He went to work for Hale, who, backed by Lonergan, was rebuilding the store. Tom worked steadily through the lazy Spring days and drew only such part of his pay as was necessary for his expenses.

"If I had any loose money in my clothes, I'd be apt to want to let 'er roar a little," he explained, "and, Gaston Olaf being marshal, 'twouldn't be right of me to do that."

Gaston, finding no immediate call for his services

as marshal, went to work on the railroad. Lonergan had started his line from both ends, and Gaston was placed in charge of the clearing crew working out of Havens Falls. He was a very different foreman than the one who had driven Taggart's men so ruthlessly. He worked soberly and steadily.

The line ran out through a forest of birch. At times, when the white trunks of the trees glistened in the warm Spring sun, when the rapidly growing leaves waved lazily in the slight breeze, and a dozen varieties of birds made the woods alive with their songs and plumage, he was moved to leap into the air and shout from sheer joy of living. He didn't do it, however. At such times he thought of what he was working for and with tightly pressed lips seriously went on with his duties.

There was only one thing to worry him now. Taggart had sobered up and had returned to his office, as cold and masterful apparently as ever. It was his busy season. His drives were behind the booms, and he was occupied with the work of turning the Winter's harvest into money.

Gaston agreed with his associates not to trouble Taggart so long as he did not trouble them. He did not for an instant fancy that Taggart had dropped the feud. He kept his skin whole in those days only by his unflagging vigilance, and by showing Taggart and his men that he was not to be caught off his guard. The strain brought new lines about his mouth. What new deviltry was Taggart planning? When would he show it, and how?

Gaston's natural impulse was to rush to meet Taggart face to face and have it over with, one way or another, in one final clash. He held his peace, however, a trying thing for him to do with an enemy in sight. His natural impulses were under complete control—for the time being.

CHAPTER XXXVII

A STORM BREWING

TAGGART'S old gang had been thoroughly broken up. A few of its members, who had taken only a small part in the memorable night fight, came drifting back, carefully feeling out the ground and ready to flee at the first sign of hostility.

The fight had been taken out of them. Craven at heart, they saw that power in the settlement had passed from Taggart to the decent element, and they sought at once to curry favour with the latter. Here, however, they met rebuffs.

Gaston pointed to the line he had drawn in the street.

"You made your choice that night," he reminded them. "Get back where you belong. Nobody will trust you up here. We won't bother you if you don't bother us, but—you're not wanted."

The leaders of the gang followed Murphy's example and did not return. The gangsters who had come back hung meekly around the river-front, and law and order were undisturbed in Havens Falls.

"Pretty dull, ain't it, Gaston Olaf?" commented Tom Pine one Saturday evening as they sat before the hotel and looked down toward the river-front. " 'Member how it used to be on a Sat'day night, down there? Now—why, you can't scare up enough excitement to start a sweat."

"Don't want to start any excitement," retorted Gas-

ton. "This is just the way we want it, nice, quiet and orderly."

Tom Pine heaved a sigh.

"Yes; but it gets darn good and dull sometimes, you'll admit that, Gaston Olaf?"

"I'll admit nothing of the sort," was the reply. "This is the way I want things; I've worked to make things this way; don't want any foolish excitement any more. Besides," his eyes lighted up, "there'll be plenty of excitement before long. Taggart isn't going to lay quiet much longer."

"Taggart? Hm, hm. What about Taggart, Big Fellow?"

Dr. Sanders, coming to see Hulda, stopped for a moment's chat. Gaston repeated his remark. The doctor shook his head.

"Hm, hm. Don't agree with you, Gaston. Old Devil Dave is a bear, sure enough, but he isn't exactly mad with the heat. No one man is going to try to buck a whole settlement by himself, and Taggart's gang is gone—busted."

"But the old man isn't," insisted Gaston. "He'll bear a lot of watching yet. The old gang is gone, sure; but there's nothing to keep him from getting another."

The doctor passed on inside, and Tom Pine lighted his pipe and went for a stroll. After a while Gaston rose and went down the street to the river-front.

As he passed McCarthy's he glanced through the open door and stopped in surprise. McCarthy was not in sight. Where he was accustomed to stand on Saturday nights stood a heavy, crop-headed man with the flat face and figure of a Slav. Impelled by curiosity, Gaston entered. New bartenders, of the same type as the man in front, were behind the bar. The

crowd, likewise, was different, squat, flat-faced foreigners, talking in a strange, guttural tongue.

"Hullo, Boss," greeted Gaston; "where's McCarthy?"

"Gone 'way," was the guttural response. "Dis place mine now."

Gaston recalled what McCarthy had said about getting ready to move.

"You've bought McCarthy out?"

"Yess. An't'ing elsse you want know?"

A snicker ran around the crowd. Gaston, looking at their flat evil faces, saw they were regarding him with sneers. Anger flared up within him. Hot words sprang to his tongue; but he caught himself in time.

"No; that's all," he said patiently and turned to go.

The proprietor followed him to the door.

"I hear 'bout you. You run diss town, hah? By ——! You won' run Jan Ulnick's place. Jan Ulnick, Polska Saloon, see? Dat's wha' diss goin' be. Polish manns goin' work for Bahss Taggar'. See? Bahss tell us all about you. You tink you want to monk' with us, hah? We don' stand dat, see?"

"I see," replied Gaston, and hurried to get himself away before his rage could master him.

He went at once to Lonergan, who was in town, and told what he had discovered. Lonergan had an old Pole in the crew at that end of the line, a man who had been with him for years and whom he could trust. This man he sent to mingle with the crowd at McCarthy's old place and learn all he could. The old man returned within an hour, shaking his head.

"It is Jan Ulnick, the bad saloon-keeper from over on the Iron Range," he reported. "The men with him are bad men, miners who would not work, who

are driven out of the mines. Ulnick had a bad place over there. He is driven out by the sheriff, and these men with him. Taggart sends for them. He tells them this is a place they can do as they please in, no sheriff, nobody to stop them—if they do not let the people here bluff them. He tells them the people here are great bluffers, but they are afraid of bad, strong men. Ulnick buys out McCarthy. Taggart promises the rest work. Other bad saloon-keepers and men are coming from the Range. They say nobody had better monkey with them."

Lonergan looked silently at Gaston as the old man finished his story, and Gaston looked back. The railroad man shook his head.

"Our friend Taggart is a great man," said he, "great general, great politician, great organiser—gone wrong."

"I knew he was about due to make a move," said Gaston. "But I never looked for this."

"He couldn't have made a better one, from his point of view," continued Lonergan. "He knows that he could never get another gang of white men around him here. They've all heard of what happened to the old gang. You've busted the old man's grip. He had to get hold of a crew that didn't know what had happened here, and wouldn't understand if they did. These ignorant, pig-faced Hunyaks fill the bill. Taggart is himself again."

"He's a fox and a wolf," admitted Gaston. "We're too strong for him now, though."

Lonergan scratched his head dubiously.

"I dunno about that, Thorson. Of course, Taggart's out for one kind of game, you understand that?"

"The first job he'll set these Hunyaks at is to put me out of business," agreed Gaston quietly.

"Yes. And if they succeed in doing that—well, you know what it will look like: Taggart will be Big Chief again, and God help Havens Falls!"

"That's it. And that's why I'm not going to take any chances."

"What's your programme, Thorson?"

"Keep out of their way as much as possible. Leave them alone if they leave us alone. But if they get so bad we can't stand 'em——"

He stopped abruptly with a snap of his teeth and stood looking with flashing eyes toward the river-front.

"Then what?"

Gaston's teeth gleamed white as he smiled.

"Law and order," said he. "Law and order forever."

Tom Pine heaved a sigh of relief when he heard of the new situation.

"Then there'll be something happening," said he contentedly. "Hunyaks are lambs when they're alone, but wolves when you get 'em in a pack. They'll be trying to run us out. Nacherly, we won't go. There'll be some excitement then. We need it. Things have been mighty dull."

In the next few days it developed that Lonergan's man had reported the situation correctly. One by one the old saloon-keepers of the front sold out, and men of Ulnick's type took their places. The dives and the dance-hall changed hands last of all. There was a complete change in the personnel of the front. The newcomers brought women with them. The river-front was in their hands and under Ulnick's leadership.

Save for this threatening change, Havens Falls would have been gloriously content with itself during those bright days of Spring. It was experiencing the

first thrill of a boom, and the optimism of a boom-town was its to a considerable degree.

That a railroad was being built up to the settlement was in itself enough to start the enthusiasm. Settlers began to come in; merchants followed them. The rattle of hammers echoed ceaselessly throughout the warm days. Houses were thrown up swiftly. Lots were staked out and sold, building lots where a few weeks before rabbits had romped undisturbed.

Plans were made to apply for a city charter, to build a school and a church. Hale's new stock came in by the wagon-load. Had it not been for the new crowd in the river-front, the settlement would have whooped with joy.

The river-front grew more threatening day by day. Taggart was discharging all his old men and replacing them with foreigners. These men grew more and more insolent toward the townspeople.

Then one day it became known that Taggart had started drinking again. Nobody was surprised. Having by choice surrounded himself with a swinish crew, he proceeded to sink himself to their level. Gaston knew that the inevitable clash would come before Taggart was over this spree.

"Inevitable, hm, hm, inevitable that he'd do that," commented Dr. Sanders. "Instincts all wrong, you know. Whisky and women; he can't rise above them. The whisky has been getting him, too, this last year. His debauches have been a little, hm, hm, a little too inhuman even for him to stand. Nerves torn to pieces; system crying periodically for excesses, each one worse than the last. He'll go to pieces; had the willies a couple times. Go to pieces sure; likely to do damage when he does."

One quiet evening the doctor, visiting Hulda at the hotel, was sent for to come down to one of the

dives. His patient was an unfortunate woman; her thin, miserable arm had been broken above the elbow by a blow. In a corner of the room sat Taggart, holding a broken whisky bottle by the neck, leering insanely, his eyes popping, his head jerking about helplessly.

"Fix her up, Doc; want to teach her 'nother lesson," he sneered. "Teach 'em all lessons. I'm king here—own 'em—body'n' soul."

Dr. Sanders, the professional instinct uppermost, before he left the place spoke once to Taggart.

"Taggart, as a physician, I must warn you: if you continue this spree any longer you're as good as dead."

"Wrong, doc; dead wrong," sneered Taggart promptly. "Another man'll die of it; not me. His name's Thorson. I'll show 'im. He's the one who's good as dead."

Gaston tightened his lips as Dr. Sanders told him of this.

"It'll come now; he'll run wild, like a mad dog," said he. "Well, the sooner the better."

Tom Pine likewise grew serious as he heard the doctor repeat Taggart's words.

"That means the old devil's set a trap for you, Gaston Olaf."

"Sure."

"And he's got them Hunyaks with him this time —too many of 'em."

"Sure again."

There was a long silence. Dr. Sanders stroked his beard nervously; Gaston sat looking at the ground. At last Tom Pine rose casually, clearing his throat.

"Guess I'll go for a little walk before turning in," he said, striving to speak carelessly, but his effort betrayed him.

"You've walked enough to-day," said Gaston, catching him by the arm. "Sit down. Don't you go starting a little war against Taggart by yourself. I've told you that doesn't go any more here."

"It's the easiest way, Gaston Olaf," protested Tom. "He's raving with liquor now. He'd try to get me on first sight. Then it'd be all over in two shakes of a doe's tail, and those Hunyaks would be easy to handle with the old man gone."

"It doesn't go," repeated Gaston firmly.

"No," agreed Dr. Sanders with a sigh, "it doesn't go. Law and order. Hm, hm. We can't break the law."

There was more silence.

"No use telling anybody what he said about me," said Gaston finally. "It wouldn't do any good, and it might cause some worry."

As they were about to part, Dr. Sanders hung back, tugging at his beard, and with many hm, hm's, indicating that something was on his mind.

"Out with it, Doc," said Gaston. "What's troubling you?"

"Well—hm, hm—you know, I'd like things to run along for the next week or so without any trouble. We're going to get married, the girl and myself, a week from to-day. She'd feel a lot better, you know, if things went along smooth and safe at this time."

"Well?"

"Hm, hm. I'm pretty sure I know a way out of this without any trouble for the present, Thorson."

"What is it?"

"This: Taggart is going to pieces rapidly. He's sure to be laid up a while at least after this awful spree. He can't do anything then. If the trouble doesn't come while he's on this drunk, it may not come at all. Anyhow it'll be delayed."

"Go on."

"Well, the way his crazy mind is running now it's only you that he's really after. If you weren't here —if you should go out of town until this spree puts Taggart on his back——"

But Gaston clouded up darkly.

"No, sir!" he snapped. "I left town once on account of Taggart. I won't do it again. Don't ask it. This time one of us is going away for good."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

"WAIT, GASTON!"

GASTON sat alone for a long time after the doctor had gone. So Sanders and Hulda were going to get married. The carefree, sport-loving bachelor had met his fate. In the quiet, blue eyes of Hulda he had found something that was more to him than his whisky-bottle, more than his bachelorhood, more than all the wild freedom of the life he hitherto had led.

The doc was going to settle down. He had given up the whisky altogether. Samson no longer ruled in the back room. The doctor had ceased to volunteer his services as referee at every fight that came within his ken. He had substituted sober, professional black for his gaudy waistcoats, and he was building a house for himself and Hulda.

Gaston smiled as he contemplated the change that had come in the doctor in the last few weeks. He was sensible that he had come to regard Sanders in a different light. At first he had merely liked him as a good fellow; now he respected him as a physician and as a man.

So the doctor and Hulda were to marry. And they would settle down in the house they were building. They would have a home. Children would come to them; the doctor would know the sober thrill of holding in his arms his first-born, flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone. As the town grew the doctor's practice would grow. He would be a big man, settled and all that, with his woman at his side.

Lucky doctor! He had found contentment, even happiness. Gaston began to dream. His quick imagination pictured himself in the doctor's place. He saw Rose moving about him—about their home—tripping lightly on her tiny feet, her face alight with joy. Was there anything better in the world than that?

"Whip-er-will; whip-er-will; whip-er-will!" suddenly cried a whip-poor-will down by the river.

Startled, Gaston looked in its direction. He saw the river-front, red with lights, heard a sudden shout of drunken song, and his brow clouded.

"Better have that settled before you begin planning," he told himself. "You may not be here to plan after that's over."

To rid himself of these dark thoughts he rose and walked up to where Dr. Sanders was building his new home. To his surprise he saw that the house was less than half finished. It would be impossible at the rate it was going to have it completed by the day set for the wedding.

"Huh! That isn't right," he mused. "The doc and Hulda ought to have their own house ready to move into!" A gleam of amusement crossed his face. The dark thoughts were forgotten. "Yes, by Jupiter! and they're going to have it, too," he said, and went home to bed smiling boyishly.

Next morning he broached his idea to Hale.

"We owe it to the doc," he explained. "He's a good fellow. We'll give 'em a building-bee and have the house all ready for them."

Hale promptly fell in with the idea.

"The store can wait," he said, and turned himself and his builders over to the new project.

Gaston explained to Lonergan why he would leave the crew for a week.

"Sure," said Lonergan. "Need any more men?"

Dr. Sanders rubbed his eyes when he came forth to inspect the progress of his building.

"Hm, hm! What's this, what's this?" he demanded.

Gaston, in the act of lifting a rafter into place, laughed down at him.

"Tom Pine and I want your old shack," he said, "so we've decided to get this one finished for you in a hurry."

"Hm, hm. All right," said the doctor. "Do the same for you some time."

The finishing of the doctor's house became a lark for the whole settlement. Other building stopped for the time being while the builders devoted themselves to the building "bee." From the rapidly growing structure rose a constant rat-tat-tat of hammers, punctuated by the jests and laughter of the crowd of workers. As they worked they considered the situation seriously.

"The doc was fig'ring on a quiet wedding, but that won't do," said one enthusiast. "Now that we've started on it we might's well do it up brown. Let's make it a holiday, and everybody lay off and give 'em a send-off that'll do the town proud."

The idea was greeted with acclamation. It was the first wedding of importance in the settlement, and the pioneers determined to make it a memorable event. The work on the house went on with increased speed.

Two days before the day set for the wedding Gaston climbed to the peak of the roof and fastened a small flag, donated by Postmaster Perkins, to the tin chimney. The crowd gathered before the house, comprising every man, woman and child of the respectable portion of Havens Falls, waved hats and handkerchiefs and cheered lustily. The house was finished and ready for the doctor and Hulda to occupy.

As Gaston came clambering down from the roof he met Rose leading a corps of women into the building. Some carried brooms, others carried curtains, plants, carpet-pieces and other articles of furniture and decoration.

"Your job is done here, Mr. Man," she said gaily. "Now the ladies come on the scene to beautify the labour of men's hands."

"That's what they always do," he replied. "Men can't do anything but put up the bare walls; it's you women who make a home out of a place."

"Of course. But a woman can't make a home unless there's a man to do the building. You see, we're dependent on one another."

"Yes. And each has got to be dependable." He looked the house over. "The doctor and Hulda will be happy here, all right; they're both the dependable kind."

Rose laughed, a trifle mischievously.

"Certainly they'll be happy. Hulda's started mothering him already, and the doctor is the kind of man who needs and likes to be mothered. Oh, yes; they'll be happy. Hulda'll be the boss in a month, and Dr. Sanders knows it and is glad of it."

Gaston gazed at her, wide-eyed with admiration.

"That's so. I can see it, now that you've spoken of it. How did you know it? Can you read all men like that?"

"No." She grew serious. "No, some men a woman can't read at all. It's all plain in the doctor's case; he —he's just a nice, ordinary man."

"Some men aren't—nice and ordinary?"

"Aren't ordinary," she corrected. "They—oh, I don't know. Gaston," she said, looking straight at him, "I wonder if I will ever know you. You're so full of surprises. One day I think of you as fierce—

no, not that—as restless and reckless. Sort of a wild, strange spirit. And then you do something sweet and pretty, like getting this house finished, so they'll have their own home to move into when they're married. What a jolly idea that was!"

"I like to see folks have homes," he said lamely.

"Yes. I know you do."

"I want a home of my own," he whispered hoarsely.

She looked at him tenderly for a moment.

"Gaston," she said softly, "are you sure that you do? Are you sure that you want that more than—your freedom? For you know—you know you can not have them both."

"I am sure——" he began, but checked himself. He hesitated, his eyes on the ground. "If I was sure, Rose——"

"But you're not, Gaston!" she whispered haltingly. "You're not! I can see it. You're not sure yet; you know you're not."

Within him he felt an all but uncontrollable impulse to reply firmly that, yes, he was sure. The impulse sprang from the very roots of his being. It cried out to him to swear that he was sure, to dominate her, to make her believe it was so, to take her for his own.

His lips even opened to utter the words. He trembled, and for an instant his blue eyes were clouded with the agony of his struggle. The selfishness of the young male rose strong in him. He wanted her so much, and, whispered impulse, it would be so easy to convince her that he was sure; it would even be easy to convince himself.

His lips were parted; the words came rushing to his tongue; and then he clicked his jaws together and threw up his head. His eyes were clean again now, and something finer than yearning, something finer

even than the light of love itself, was gleaming in the deep blue of them.

"Rose," his voice was normal and steady again—"I don't know whether I am sure."

She nodded gravely.

"I knew you weren't sure, Gaston. I could feel it."

"When I am sure, do you think you could feel that, too?"

Again she nodded.

"If ever you are sure, I think I would feel that, too."

"'If'? Then you don't think——"

She turned away without reply.

"If I do come to know that I'm sure," he persisted, "and you feel it, what then?"

She turned back and looked at him for a long time.

"Gaston," she said, "I like you, and I like Dick Hale. But you are trying to make me more than like you. Oh, Gaston! You mustn't talk to me like this unless you become sure of yourself."

"Forgive me," he whispered penitently. "I'll never speak another word of it—unless I'm sure I have the right."

She held out her hand impulsively.

"Shake!" she said, smiling. "Now I must get to work."

As she turned to join the other women, Hale came up, his arms filled with rolls of wall-paper. Rose eagerly tore open a roll to look at the pattern.

"Oh, Dick!' she cried. "What perfect taste you've got! Such a dainty blue, and those tiny flowers! Won't it make their sitting-room perfectly darling!"

They went inside, Rose fairly skipping with eagerness while Hale smiled patiently. Gaston, looking after them, smiled also; but he only did so because

it was natural for him to smile when he was hit hard.

"Come on, Thorson," called a man from behind the house, and Gaston roused himself. "Where are we going to build the dance floor?"

That was another idea which the settlement had conceived to aid in celebrating the wedding. They were going to have a dance, of course. What would a wedding be without a dance? An orchestra was to be brought up from La Croix, not merely a couple of fiddlers, but a real orchestra, including horns and a trap-drummer.

It would be a celebration as to attract such a crowd as never yet had been known north of La Croix. Would there be room for everybody to dance in the doctor's new house? Obviously there would not be. Thus it was resolved to splurge and lay down an outdoor dancing-floor which would send the fame of Havens Falls flying broadcast throughout the woods.

The men turned from the building of the house to the laying of the floor. While some put down the boards others went into the swamp and cut a wagon-load of small evergreen trees. These were fastened upright around the floor, enclosing it in four odorous, green walls.

To further embellish the scene, Postmaster Perkins brought forth a roll of old bunting. The boys cheered. It reminded them of the Fourth of July.

On the night before the wedding it was all complete. The house was ready for occupancy; the orchestra was in town; the floor was in shape. Hale had gone to La Croix to drive the minister up in the morning, and it awaited only the morning for the celebration to begin.

"Well," said Gaston, as he and Tom Pine quit work

that evening, "I'm surprised they let us get that done without a hitch."

Tom whistled.

"You mean those Hunyaks and Taggart? You been thinking about them, too?"

"I couldn't hardly forget them, could I? They've been noisy enough every night. They've left us strictly alone, though, and that looks bad. Taggart must have been holding 'em in, though he's plumb crazy from drinking. If he has it's only been for one thing."

"To-morrow, you mean, Gaston Olaf?"

"Yes, it would be like the old devil to save his worst stroke for a day like to-morrow."

Tom Pine grew thoughtful. He retired early to his room. From the window of the room he could look down the river-front from end to end.

Tom carefully oiled his rifle and Gaston's, tried levers and triggers, loaded the magazines to the brim, and went to bed. In the morning he complained of excruciating pains in his left leg, alleging that he had strained it the day before. Besides, his rheumatism always bothered him that time of the year, he said. It would be necessary, he declared, for him to keep to his bed most of the day, lest the trouble become aggravated.

Gaston laughed, knowing well Tom's dislike for conventional festivities and recognising a subterfuge. But Tom had moved his bed so he could lie on it and look out of the window upon the river-front.

CHAPTER XXXIX

TAGGART STRIKES

THE day of the wedding dawned clear, cool and sunny. A slight breeze, blowing from the woods toward the river, carried over the town the many fresh odours of northern woods in the full bloom of early Summer. There was the odour of balsam in the air, and of budding tamaracks and spruce.

Up from the swamp came the smell of cowslips and yellow-headed water-lilies, while from the sunny sides of the surrounding hills there came drifting down the gentle odour of dying woods violets, which in spots covered the ground like a carpet. Up above, against the sky, tiny specks of white clouds shared with a pair of lazily soaring hawks in the vast blue dome of the heavens. The birds of the forest, with no clatter of hammering to alarm them, drew near, and in the stillness of the morning their clear notes ringed the settlement around with song. It was a day when the whole world seemed glad and filled with young life—a day fit for the wedding of a Hulda.

The people of the settlement, and their visitors, appeared early, dressed for the occasion. Postmaster Perkins was solemnly gorgeous in ancient swallow-tailed coat, high, leather boots, hickory shirt and wide-brimmed G. A. R. hat. Lonergan even went further—he wore a new suit of black, a stiff shirt *and* collar!

From these extremes of fashion the apparel of the

men ranged to the fringed buckskin shirts and trousers of the trappers who had come in from the woods for the occasion. Most of the women and girls managed to display something new in the way of dress, sash or ribbon. Some of the girls were spick-and-span in white dresses with wide blue sashes. A few Indians waddled stolidly about in blankets and moccasins.

The wedding was set for "high noon," as the editor at La Croix wrote in his next week's issue. After the ceremony, dinner was to be served, and then the dancing was to begin.

In the private recesses of Olson's Hotel, Rose and other women had Hulda prepared for the event an hour before the time set. It was with difficulty that Hulda was restrained from doing her share of the work about the hotel that morning. Only after she saw that neighbours were efficiently assisting her mother, did she agree to "sit like a loafer," as she expressed it.

When fully dressed for her wedding Hulda's appearance threw her attendants into ecstasies of delight. Of all the women present she was the only one serene and undisturbed. Even in stiffly starched white, and laced to within an inch of her life, the magnificent freedom of her body was untrammelled. The red and cream of her complexion was a trifle heightened by excitement; her steady blue eyes were serene with happiness and triumph; down her back two thick braids of yellow-golden hair fell below her waist. At times she blushed slightly.

In the doctor's bachelor quarters Dr. Sanders, in the hands of Gaston and Lonergan, sat fully dressed, waiting for the noon hour with all the serenity and composure of a man about to be hanged for stealing sheep. To further his comfort his two companions

assured him that the agony of waiting was nothing compared to what he would experience during the ceremony.

"Wait until you get up there before the minister with everybody looking at you," encouraged Gaston. "Then you'll have something to get cold sweats about."

The doctor retorted with an old shoe, which Gaston ducked, laughingly.

Lonergan looked at his watch.

"Hello! Ten minutes after eleven. Hale and the preacher are about due."

"Maybe they'll be late; maybe something's happened; maybe they can't come." The doctor grasped at the straws eagerly.

"Oh, no," Gaston assured him. "Nothing's happened. Hale will be here on time. You can't escape. A few minutes more now and we'll be leading you out where the crowd can get one last, fond look at you."

Dr. Sanders swung to the window, glanced out and retreated.

"Whew! Everybody in town's ready and waiting. Regular mob. Hm, hm. You'd think they'd never seen a wedding the way they're waiting—think it was a show."

"It is," chuckled Gaston. "Take my word for it, Doc, you'll be a show all by yourself."

"It's an almighty quiet crowd," said Lonergan speculatively. "The boys are staying away from the saloons."

"They all like doc and respect the trouble he's going through."

"Quiet down in the river-front, too. Wonder if they're doing that because there's a little decency left in 'em?"

"What time is it?" cried the doctor petulantly. "Darn it! Why doesn't Hale show up? Said he'd be here about eleven, didn't he? If he's coming, why doesn't he come and have it over with?"

A number of women passed the office, going toward the new house.

"They're beginning to assemble in your honour, Doc," laughed Gaston. "Your time draws nigh. All we're waiting for now is the preacher."

"Maybe he won't come," insisted the doctor hopefully. "Maybe we'll have to put it off."

They sat in silence for a while. Again Lonergan looked at his watch.

"Twenty minutes after eleven," he said. "They'll be here now, or something's happened."

Gaston and the railroad builder stepped outside and looked down the street. The road from La Croix ran along the river; Hale and the minister would have to drive through the river-front when they came.

"Not in sight yet," said Lonergan.

"It's a warm morning for fast driving," said Gaston. "Hale's a sensible man; he won't kill his horses, but he'll have the preacher here on time."

Lonergan nodded. The river-front as they looked at it was deserted. Not a man was in sight, and no noise came from the open doors.

"Say! They're behaving themselves down there today, aren't they?" said Lonergan.

Gaston did not reply. His eyes suddenly had narrowed to slits. That quiet down there wasn't natural. It was too good to be true. Gaston's quick senses had caught the unusual silence and read it for the unnatural calm that is prelude to a storm.

"It's too good, Lonergan," he began. Then, "Hello! There they come!"

Hale's buggy had swung out of the timber and was

approaching the river-front. The horses were trotting easily; Gaston could make out the pale face of the minister beside Hale. They were passing the first saloon in the row now. And then the peace of the river-front was broken.

With one single shout, as a signal, there sprang from each side of the street a dozen men. They caught the horses by the head ere Hale could reach his whip. They threw themselves onto the buggy.

It was only a matter of seconds. Then the frightened team was coming up the street on the jump, Hale rolling unconscious on the seat, and the men of the river-front were rushing back into their lowest dive, bearing the struggling figure of the minister with them.

"God!" cried Lonergan.

Gaston uttered no sound. He threw himself upon the maddened horses as they came tearing up, and with Lonergan's help soon had them quieted.

"Good God!" cried the men as they came running up.

Gaston said not a word. He dropped his hold on the horses the instant other hands came to help. He looked not at Hale, who lay senseless with a cut on the side of his head; he paid no attention to the crowd gathering about him. With one tug he tore open his collar, to give room to his swelling throat. He was panting through his nose, his lips closed.

A double-bitted axe leaned against the doctor's cabin. With his berserk rage venting itself in one shrill cry, Gaston seized the gleaming tool and seemed to fly over the ground straight toward the door of the dive where the minister had been captured.

"Good God! He's going alone!" cried a young man and, empty-handed, started after him; he was Erik, the boy who had been beaten by the pugilist,

and afterward had worked in Gaston's crew on the right-of-way.

"Come back, Thorson!" cried Lonergan.

It would have been too late, even if Gaston could have been halted then.

They were waiting for him down at the river-front. The mind that had directed this scheme had expected that Gaston would be in the van of those to rescue the minister.

"He's gone!" groaned Lonergan.

Gaston was passing McCarthy's old place. In the doorway appeared the bull-necked Ulnick, shot-gun in hand. He laughed as he deliberately cocked both barrels. He had a cigar in his mouth; his face was devilish with triumph as he raised the gun toward his shoulder. And the next instant he lay face downward on his own door-step, shot through the temples, dead.

Tom Pine had not remained in his room in vain. He had not been able to save the minister; that had come too quickly, too unforeseen. But he had witnessed the assault on the buggy, had seen the minister borne away, and he knew what would follow. He had seen Gaston go flying down the street, and his rifle was cocked and ready, covering the river-front as a deer-hunter covers the range before him when the game is about to jump.

Ulnick's was the first menacing figure to show in any doorway, and Tom Pine threw down on him and fired with the sure, easy aim of the old-timer.

Before Ulnick's body had struck the ground, Tom had jacked in a new cartridge and fired again. A man with a revolver had thrust his head out of the dance-hall, and Tom's bullet passed through his jaw and splintered a window.

Then crack, crack, crack! The river-front suddenly had a bath of lead. Into every door Tom sent his

bullets, the shots coming so rapidly that it seemed that several men must be firing. Glass flew in splinters. A third man, sticking his head out of a door, was down on the floor, a bullet-hole through his cheek. The screams of the two wounded men supplemented the rattle of shots and the crash of glass.

From the dance-hall a revolver cracked. The bullet flew past Gaston's head. Behind him Erik grunted in surprised fashion and sank down with his hands held to his breast.

Tom riddled the dance-hall in reply. Shrieks and curses came forth, but no more shots.

The river-front was a pandemonium. Women began to leave their dives and run for the woods. Not a man showed himself. Suddenly the minister came rolling out of the dive into the street, thrown out by the terrified men who had captured him. Their plans had gone awry; the terribly accurate shooting of Tom Pine had tamed them; they were eager to do anything that might stop that devilish rain of lead.

Gaston stopped before the dance-hall. His blood-rage had passed; he saw things clearly. In the fight which must ensue, if he rushed the dance-hall, the minister would surely get hurt; possibly be killed, and the wedding would have to be postponed. He looked through the bullet-shattered door. What he saw inside there caused him to pick the minister up under one arm and deliberately turn back. Behind him Tom's bullets ripped the doors of the hall to splinters.

A crowd was coming to help by this time. Men had reached Erik and were carrying him away.

"Get back, boys!" roared Gaston. "Get back and get ready. We're going down there again, but we're going to be ready for them when we do."

He put the minister down and pleaded and fought with the crowd, and turned it back.

"Back, boys! Get to cover! We've got the minister now; the wedding needn't be delayed. And we'll get 'em down there when we're ready."

In a few seconds he had prevailed. The minister had been rushed into the hotel; Erik, sorely wounded, was lying in the doctor's office; and Gaston himself had shown an example and was safely behind cover.

Up in his room Tom Pine sighed with relief. It was about time. He had kept the river-front indoors, but now both rifles were empty.

CHAPTER XL

THE END OF DEVIL DAVE

THE quiet that settled suddenly down upon the settlement then was terrible. It lay like a pall in the air, snuffing out the life and gaiety that had prevailed a moment before. Men moved about silently, their eyes hard. A child cried suddenly some place, a door slammed; then it was still again.

Men looked at each other and parted without a word. They gathered their women and children from the street, from about the hotel, the dance-floor and the doctor's new house, and grimly carried them to their homes.

"Stay indoors," they said, and returned to the crowd gathered in the shelter of the doctor's office.

No time this for the women to wail and plead against rash action. It had gone beyond that. The women looked at their men's faces and cowered in their homes, white-faced but silent.

"Men!" cried the minister, aghast. "What is this you plan to do?"

"That's all right, Reverend; see you later," they said, and locked him safe out of harm's way in the hotel.

Behind the doctor's office the friends of Erik, men formerly of Crew One, who now were in Lonergan's employ, had armed themselves to the last man and were insisting that although Erik, on the doctor's word, would live, it was their blood-right to lead the attack on the river-front. Opposed to them were the men of the settlement.

"It's our town that's been given a bad name," ey said. "We've got the right to go down there rst."

Gaston fought steadily to hold both factions back. He realised that the clash was inevitable; but now, that his rage had vented itself, he was clear-headed and cool. If the crowd in its present mood struck the river-front, whose men it outnumbered, the result must be a slaughter. Nothing could stay Erik's friends from taking vengeance, and if a fight were thus started, the gangsters would fight back and good men surely would be killed. As furiously as he had rushed to the attack, Gaston now struggled to delay the conflict until the men had grown cooler.

"The doc's wedding is set for twelve," he shouted. "Are we going to spoil that for him? Let's have the wedding first, then go down and clean them up."

A low growl greeted his words. He knew they would not acquiesce, but it was anything for a delay.

"No time for weddings," came back the reply. "Let's be going."

"No!" cried Gaston. "You'll wait a while. This thing has got to be done orderly. Do you want to give yourselves as bad a name as those Hunyaks?"

"We want to give ourselves such a name that no toughs will ever again try anything like this in our town," replied Perkins.

"Good! That's just it. And we're going to do it according to law and order, not like a lot of toughs on a spree."

That struck home with the older men.

"That's right," they said. Others growled: "Spit out what you've got to say, and let's get started."

"Lonergan," shouted Gaston, "can that old Polander of yours go down among those fellows in safety?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I'm going to serve notice on every man and woman in the river-front to clear out within an hour."

"Hour, ——!" came an interruption. "Ten minutes is plenty."

"Make it five!" cried others.

He compromised with them. It was then a quarter to twelve.

"We'll make it half an hour," said he, realising that he could hold them no longer. "That will give 'em until a quarter past twelve."

"Good enough."

Paper and pencil were brought, and with a board for desk Gaston set to work to draft his notice. After scores of suggestions from the crowd he wrote as follows:

TO ALL PEOPLE IN THE RIVER-FRONT:

This is to notify you that you have thirty minutes to get out of town. We are coming down to get you at 12:15. Leave before then, or God help you!

THORSON,
Marshal of Havens Falls.

"That's the style; that's doing it in bang-up fashion," was the verdict of the men who read over his shoulder.

Lonergan's old Polander took the note and his directions stolidly.

"If they can't read, translate it for them," said Gaston.

"Awri', bahss!"

The old man sallied forth on his mission. They watched him as he went. How would the toughs receive the note? They saw the old man enter Ulnick's place, where Ulnick's body had been dragged inside, the paper held in his hand. After a few minutes he came out, crossed the street and entered another saloon, still bearing the paper.

Not a sound came up to the watchers. As he emerged from the second place a man came timidly out of the dance-hall and called to the messenger in Polish. The old man spoke rapidly, handing the man the notice. The latter tossed it into the dance-hall and without a word ran for the river road. From Ulnick's some one shouted at the old man. He held up his hand and came back to the doctor's office.

"They say, can they go and you no shoot 'em, hah?" he said.

A sigh of relief escaped Gaston.

"Yes," he said. "Tell them no one will be hurt before a quarter past twelve."

"Hold on!" cried Erik's friends. "That don't go with us. These guys may all duck out. We won't stand by and see that; we want to play a little with the fellow who shot Erik."

"You bet! None of that letting 'em go. Let's go down and make 'em give him up right now."

Gaston held up his hand.

"Boys, I promise you you'll get the man who shot Erik."

"He's in that dance-hall," they protested. "He'll get away with the rest."

"He's in that dance-hall," agreed Gaston, "but he won't get away with the rest. I promise you that."

"Did you see him?"

"I saw him. And if he comes out, I promise you, I'll be the first to go down and get him."

"All right, Thorson. But that's got to be good."

"It'll be good," said Gaston, and sent the messenger on his way.

There was a short lull after the old man had delivered his message. Then the exodus began. Like rats, the denizens of the places of vice came slinking

out in the sunlight. They hugged the walls, casting fearful looks over their shoulders. They saw Ulnick's body lying on the saloon floor, saw the broken windows, splintered doors, and bullet-marks, and they ran.

The two wounded men called pleadingly for assistance, but no one heard. Five minutes before the time-limit had elapsed, the last woman to leave the dives had gone from the river-front and was following the long, straggling line hurrying down the river road, the last of the forces of vileness to leave Havens Falls.

"And the man who shot Erik wasn't among 'em," said Gaston.

"You sure?" Erik's friends were suspicious. "You ain't trying to play with us, Thorson?"

"Sure not, boys; he's still in the dance-hall."

"We'll go and see."

"You will," agreed Gaston icily, "when it's twelve-fifteen."

By sheer force of will he held them. They fidgeted angrily, like dogs in the leash with their quarry before them. The minutes dragged painfully. Two minutes remained. Then one minute.

"Come on," said a youngster, "that's close 'nough."

Gaston held him back.

Presently Lonergan snapped his watch shut and nodded.

"Come along, boys," said Gaston quietly.

They followed down the street in uncanny silence, crowding closely about him as he led the way to the dance-hall. The door was open and they could see inside. They first saw the man whom Tom Pine had shot through the jaw. He was sitting on the floor, leaning drunkenly against the wall.

Then they saw the other man. He was lolling in

a chair against the bar, grinning in ghastly fashion at the poor fellow on the floor. His eyes were popping from his head; his jaw sagged weakly; his tongue hung out; his long arms drooped down nervelessly. At his feet a big revolver lay where it had dropped from his fingers.

It was what was left of Devil Dave Taggart.

The crowd halted at the doorway, aghast at the demoniacal transformation before them. Gaston entered alone. Taggart neither saw nor heard; his attention was all for the man on the floor.

"Taggart!" shouted Gaston, putting a hand on his shoulder.

Taggart looked up slowly, no gleam of intelligence in his blood-shot eyes. In spite of his enmity for the man, Gaston felt a twinge of pity. He picked up the revolver.

"Taggart! Get up!"

With his left arm he raised him to his feet. Taggart waved a hand at the wounded man and laughed slobberingly.

"Funny face," he whispered. "Look at's face."

"Come along," said Gaston.

With the revolver in his right hand he led the way out.

"Boys," he said coldly, "you can't have him—not now. If he'd put up a fight it would have been different. Now I'm going to take him down to his office and lock him up. Out of the way!"

He went straight through them; they stood back and let him pass without a word. Then they followed as Gaston led his prisoner toward the office on the river bank.

Taggart went along in a stupor at first. He did not recognise Gaston, did not sense what was happening. As they approached the river, however, his eyes

seemed to clear. At the sight of his own office he stopped suddenly.

"Come on, Taggart," said Gaston.

Taggart looked around wildly. He saw the river a few steps away, saw the crowd behind them, and lastly he saw Gaston. As if in a flash of lightning he understood. With a cry like a wounded animal he tore loose. He stood up straight and stiff, himself for an instant, his eyes upon the man who had torn his evil hold from Havens Falls.

"Thorson, you ——!" he screamed, and dove forward.

His arms caught Gaston and held him helpless. The strength of a maniac's was Taggart's for that moment. Down in the sawdust they fell, tightly clinched. Twice they rolled over and over. Taggart's mad laugh rang loud to the heavens; and then they rolled over again and, still locked together, dropped into the river.

The water was deep and still where they fell in. The current closed over them and swept on its way again, serene, undisturbed, while the crowd lined the bank, silent, helpless. The seconds seemed hours. Many of them passed, and still the swift, black waters rushed on unbroken.

Men panted open-mouthed. They groaned in agony as air-bubbles broke the surface. And then they shouted once, sharply. Gaston came popping out of the water like a cork, gasped hungrily at the air, and came swimming weakly back to shore—alone.

A few more bubbles appeared farther down-stream. Then the black water once more was slipping on its way, calm and beautiful as ever, with no hint on its surface of the thing that was hidden in its depths.

Gaston stood dripping and panting on the river bank. He looked at the water from which he had

so narrowly escaped. And he turned and went up the street without a word.

"Men, men!" said the minister, when released from the hotel. "What have you done? You bade me to come among you to join two of your young people in a new life, and you make the day one of strife and bloodshed."

Postmaster Perkins bared his silvery head reverently.

"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord!" rose his aged treble. "Reverend, what we done had to be done. There was a jam, and she had to be broke so decent people could live here, and fellows like you could come through the white water and bring light into the wilderness. The Lord took the bad people away. He giveth us young people, like Hulda Olson and Doc Sanders, to marry and have children, and people the land. The old order changeth, Reverend; the wickedness has gone from Havens Falls for good. The new order cometh, and it's full of hope and promise; and the Lord looks upon his work and finds it good. Reverend, we ain't in no mood to hold the celebration we planned, but in this dark moment we need that wedding to help us look toward the future."

"Yes," said Hulda, firmly. "Ve skäll get married yoost the same."

So the doctor and Hulda were married—with a silent crowd of witnesses where hilarity had been planned. And after the ceremony the minister prayed, not only for the happiness of the newly wedded couple, but for the future of the town, that the men thereof might turn from violence to gentleness toward all their kind, forgive their enemies, patiently turn the other cheek——

Gaston looked sharply across at Rose. She had lifted her eyes to him in the same moment.

"—Live their lives soberly and earnestly——"

Her eyes dropped.

"—God-fearing and useful citizens, priding themselves not upon their strength——"

Rose raised her eyes to Hale's bowed head.

"—Amen!"

CHAPTER XLI

DAYS OF QUIET

PEACE had come at last to Havens Falls, the deep, abiding peace of a community solemnly consecrated to law and order. The tragic manner of its coming had left its mark; Havens Falls was not likely to forget what the river-front had meant to it; it would never again run the risk of similar conditions. Before the traces of the last cruel struggle had been removed, a solemn mass-meeting was held before Olson's Hotel.

"It was whisky that did it, boys—whisky, and wickedness, and hell-raising," quavered old Perkins. "Touch and go, it was, boys; and we happened to win because a man came to town who was big enough to make us strong. We were a helpless little hell-hole here in the woods before he came to town. Now we're clean, thank God! As clean as the timber around us. Boys, are we going to risk getting in another gang like what we had? Are we going to have another river-front? Or are we going to have a decent town that will grow and be a credit to the men who made it?"

"A decent town—that's the ticket!" came the responses. "We've had enough of the other thing. What do you say, Thorson?"

Gaston looked down toward the river-front. For the time being he was as serious-minded as any man in the crowd. He saw not the glitter and excitement of the front, but only its sordid vileness, its menace

to a community of homes, of families, of women and children.

"I say," he began slowly, and paused as a vision grew before his eyes, "I say we ought to burn the river-front to the ground, and scatter the ashes, and build new buildings where it stands, so there'd be nothing left to remind us of what was there or what happened before it was cleaned up."

They voted on it, a vote of hands, and even the wild youngsters working for Lonergan voted, "Ay." So the river-front was burned one afternoon when there was no wind, burned until its last trace of wickedness had been purged by fire; and in the evening, before the last red coals had died to ashes, the settlers had decided to build their first schoolhouse where the old dance-hall had stood, and to do it at once, so the children would have a place ready for them when the school season opened in the Fall.

"And now that's done," said Gaston. "The river-front is gone; the town starts new, with nothing to make trouble for it or keep it from having clean hands. Taggart's gone; so I start fresh, too, and there's nothing left here to stir the hell up in me, or get me to fighting, or keep me from living quiet, respectable, and settled."

Tom Pine coughed in a suspicious manner. A coroner's jury having decided that Ulnick's death was "an act of God," Tom had a rather improved opinion of himself. He and Gaston were sitting, chair-tilted, against the front of Dr. Sanders's old office. They had moved into the building immediately after the doctor had vacated, Gaston having declared that it was time they began to practise living in a home of their own. Tom Pine had acquiesced eagerly; there was more freedom in "baching it" than in living at the hotel.

"No-o-o," drawled Tom, "there's nothing left here to stir a fellow up, that's sure."

"And that's just how we want it," said Gaston. "Everything nice and orderly, and nothing to keep a man from being a steady-going citizen!"

"Except himself."

"Eh?"

"Except himself," repeated Tom. "If a man ain't made to be a steady-going citizen, well, it don't make any difference where you set him down, Gaston Olaf, he ain't going to be one, that's all. Some folks are made to live in houses and use the same bed all their lives; others ain't. I won't say any more than that."

"No need to say any more," said Gaston. "You mean that I'm one of those who're not made to settle down."

Tom Pine shook his old head.

"You can't make a canary-bird or a barnyard fowl out of an eagle," said he. "There ain't any chance for argument about that—that's nature."

Gaston chuckled.

"You're a hard one for sure, Tom Pine. Have you seen any canary-bird work around this settlement?"

"Not so far. It's been a nice, busy place for a he-man to camp in up to now, I admit you that. But that was because Taggart and the river-front were here and it was hell-for-leather between them and us.

"But they're gone now, Gaston Olaf; those days are past. This town's pretty near got religion, and it's going to stay that way. What then? Day after day the same thing, week after week, and year after year, with nothing happening for excitement. Could folks like you'n me stand it, Gaston?"

The picture unveiled itself swiftly to Gaston. He

saw the neat, proper town that Havens Falls was destined to be—day after day, year after year of it. He felt crowded, confined. But there was Rose, and the dream.

"You quit that kind of talk, Tom Pine," he commanded gruffly. "I don't know about you, but I do know that I want to settle down."

He went back to work for Lonergan. That was the thing for him to do—break himself in at steady, every-day work.

His experience in the woods and his natural leadership of men made him an invaluable aid to the railroad man. With him at its head the clearing-crew slashed its way through the timber in record time.

After the clearing came the grading and filling. Day after day, week after week, Gaston stuck to his task. The short, hot Summer of the Northland was on, and along the line swarms of mosquitoes, deer-flies and "no-see-um's" made life miserable. Men threw down their tools and demanded their time. Lonergan even suggested a lay-off for a week.

"Not for a day," said Gaston stubbornly.

He was beginning to hear the whisperings of doubt within himself. The clear lakes, the rivers, the untracked woods had begun to call. The lure of strange trails and adventures new had whispered to his restless spirit.

He put temptation away savagely. Not a single day would he yield in the programme he had mapped out for himself. For it was in the moments of idleness that the call made itself heard.

"You're getting kind of peekid-looking, Gaston Olaf," warned Tom Pine.

"I know it," admitted Gaston. His shaving-mirror had showed him the new lines gathering between the eyebrows and about the mouth.

The quiet, lazy Sundays came to be long and tiresome. He seldom sought Rose's company since their conversation at the house-building, and save for thoughts of her, he admitted to himself, town-life was irksome.

Hale, likewise, spent less time at the Havens home than previously. He was not given to intruding himself where he was not sure that he was wanted.

The settlement developed rapidly. Taggart's property had fallen into the hands of a far-away niece, and the lumber company to which she sold promptly put the cutover land on the market, induced settlers to come in, and began to assist in all ways to build up the country.

"When the railroad gets through, this country will crowd up right away," mused Gaston, as he read the signs.

He reproved himself promptly for such thoughts. Was it not for this that he had worked and risked his life?

The heat of the Summer passed, and the time for the first frosts drew near. Instead of the ring of the axes of the clearing-crew there now rang out along the right-of-way the clang of spiking hammers fastening the steel rails to the new-laid ties. Instead of teams bearing loads of ties, a small locomotive came tooting slowly toward Havens Falls, pushing before it flat-car loads of the rails that the crews were laying.

Day by day the twin lines of steel crept northward toward the settlement, and day by day, as he led his crew, Gaston sensed how completely the humdrum of civilisation would conquer the country when the railroad began operations. The toot of the locomotive in the timber was a warning. It knelled the passing of adventure in that part of the Big Woods.

Yet Gaston worked steadily. There was a certain

thrill in the building of the railroad, and he did not permit himself to think of the days to come after the road was finished.

The first frosts came, touching the birch and maple with a gentle wand, and tinting their leaves dainty pink and yellow. The air was like rare wine, and the woods were clamorous with the chatter of birds congregating for the long flight southward.

In the morning, while trudging to work, Gaston paused and with his eyes followed the flight of migrating ducks across the trackless sky. He watched them until they were out of sight, and he wondered what new scenes they would view before they sought rest at nightfall.

The whistle of the locomotive now could be heard in the settlement. Lonergan had added more men to the crews, and the work was being pushed so the road would be completed before the frost settled into the ground. Gaston did his work steadily and well, but there was a lack of buoyance and enthusiasm in him. He now looked forward to the end of the work with a feeling of discomfort.

The woods were a riot of colour now. Autumn was in the Northland, and the gods of the glorious Indian Summer had painted the world with a lavish brush. Deep purple and burnt umber, blood-red and faintest yellow ochre, rioted together on the landscape; and over the hills, like a delicate veil, hung the Indian Summer's faint, blue haze.

With less than a week's work remaining on the railroad, there came to the settlement a rumour of a silver strike in the rough barrens far to the north, across the line. Daring, adventurous men were flocking thither, said rumour, to pit their strength and luck against the cruel northern Winter and crueler men. The men working on the railroad leaned on their tools

and wondered what it would be like up there. Gaston heard them and grimly ordered them back to their tasks.

That night, however, he paced up and down along the river until far into the morning, and his palms were raw from the pressure of his finger nails.

CHAPTER XLII

"THE TRAIL, THE TRAIL!"

THE railroad was finished. The twin streaks of steel had reached Havens Falls, binding it closely to the rest of the great civilised world.

The finish came at the end of a hard day's work. Remained only the ceremony of driving the last spike, which was to be performed with due rites and celebration in the morning, and the first train, bearing mails, freight and passengers, would come tooting its way into the settlement. The big job was done, and Havens Falls was full of gaiety that night, anxious to make of the morrow a big gala-day in its history.

Gaston was not gay. He was the last man of the crew to leave the line. He left reluctantly. The job was done. Havens Falls was no longer a stray, woods-settlement, but a new growing town on a railroad.

In the old settlement he had had his place. He had played his part well. But what place did he have in this town, where people were talking of flour-mills and potato-warehouses, and dreaming of paved streets and electric-lights?

This was the question that had troubled him for the last weeks. As the signs of the town's development increased so had increased Gaston's sense of strangeness and confinement. He felt cooped up, cramped, and out of place. He had tried to deny it, but now he was forced to acknowledge to himself. He did not belong.

Stores and sidewalks, plate-glass windows, regular hours, electric-lights! What had he to do with them! He had come to Havens Falls and had found a part waiting for him to play. But now his part had been played; never again would the settlement have need of one of his kind; his job was done; he was through.

With something like a sigh Gaston turned his back on the line and came through the cool, early darkness into Havens Falls.

The town was full of people, on hand for the great event of the morrow. At the hotel there was no talk save of the railroad and what it would do for the country.

In the midst of this liveliness Gaston was as a stranger at a feast. He retired to the doctor's old office and without a word Tom Pine and he sat down on their door-step, each busy with the same thought. Up above the white northern stars began to gleam through the darkness. And in the lull the cry of a lone wolf on some far-away hill-top came floating into the town.

"I wonder," said Tom Pine softly, "I wonder what she's like up there where they say they've found silver?"

The words fell upon Gaston's troubled spirit like skilled fingers upon the strings of a harp. Eagerly he began to talk. The little town fell away and he saw the long, rough trail through the great rough North, with who could know what sort of adventures at its end!

"She's a hard piece of country up there from all I hear," interjected Tom Pine, "and harder than Sam Hill to get to."

Pooh! What was a little rough country? Did anyone expect to find metals stored up beneath city side-

walks? The harder the better. None but real men could win in. All the more for the ones who were strong enough to stand the going.

Gaston rose and stood before Tom Pine, gesticulating vehemently. The new lines had gone from his face; he felt as if a burden had fallen from his shoulders. Then suddenly he thought of Rose and sat down.

After a while he arose and went slowly up toward the Havens home. He would go and see her. He would settle it one way or another that night.

Rose was working on something white when he found her, and though she hastily dropped it into her work-basket at his coming he saw that it was a garment so tiny that in his ignorance he fancied it must be for a doll.

"What's that?" he asked. "Making a doll dress?"

"Yes; no," she said, tucking her work out of sight. "That is—Gaston, you mustn't be so inquisitive."

"Wha-a-at?" Her confusion puzzled him. She was actually blushing. "What's there about a doll's dress that you've got to hide it from me?"

"Nothing, absolutely nothing. What do you care about dolls' clothes, anyway?"

"Then why don't you work at it? Don't let me interfere."

"It isn't polite to work when one's entertaining company," she bantered.

"Go on and work," he laughed. "I like to see you sewing."

"Sewing!" she said scornfully. "Oh, how ignorant men are! I wasn't sewing at all; that's embroidery. It will take weeks and weeks to finish it."

"Embroid——?"

"Gaston!" He had playfully reached for the garment. "Gaston! Well, I never!"

He was holding the tiny thing up in his huge, brown hands.

"Embroidery?" he repeated, looking at her, and then he understood.

"Oh, oh," he said slowly, and carefully replaced the dress in the basket. "I'm a clod-hopper. I didn't understand; I wouldn't have said a word or touched it——"

"You're as curious as a woman," she said, tucking the garment out of sight.

"I apologise; you know, I didn't know."

"I know it." They looked at one another.

"Who's it for?"

"Hulda, of course. Now if you say another word, one single word, I'll be real angry."

"Hulda?" he repeated. "The doc? Well, I'll be darned!"

"Stop it! Not another word." Rose's self-possession had returned. "Tell me, who is going to drive the last spike in the road to-morrow? I've heard that the honour is to be given you."

He answered aimlessly. His thoughts were not with the road. The little garment had spoken to him of certain things, had opened his eyes to tender responsibilities of marriage. And at last he was quite sure of himself—quite sure that he had no right to try to realise his dream. For whatever happened, he must not run the risk of making her unhappy.

"I'm going away," he said, holding out his hand.

"I thought so," she said, and he was glad she smiled. "I've seen it coming on you."

They shook hands warmly.

"Are you going away for good?" she asked.

He studied a moment before replying. She would

have Hale now, Hale, the steady and responsible. She would be happy.

"Yes," he said, "thank God, it is for good."

Outside, beneath the clear white stars, he breathed to the bottom of his lungs. He had done it. With a smiling face he had done it. And though the pain in his heart was like a sharp knife he had the peace of mind which told him he had done what was—square.

Down the street he met the doctor.

"You old son-of-a-gun, you, doc!" he chuckled, and smote him boyishly on the back.

He found Hale in his store.

"Hale," said he sternly, "you're a darn fool. There's a girl up the street waiting for you and you stick down here and grouch by yourself. How d'you expect to win Rose if you don't go after her? I know—I know what you're going to say. Staying away on my account. Well, that needn't bother you any more. I'm going away. Going to stay away. And if you don't go up there to-night and get down to business I'll—I'll change my opinion of you. Will you do it?"

"But, Thorson——"

"But, nothing! Say you'll do it."

"I will."

"Skookum! Shake hands."

He went out of the store like a gust of wind, humming.

When he entered the doctor's old office some time later he bore two blanket packs, stuffed and strapped, ready for the trail. Tom Pine was asleep. Gaston dug out his old woods-clothes and noiselessly made a complete change. Arrayed as he was when he had come to the settlement—soft, rubber shoes, buckskin trousers, muskrat cap, blue shirt and silken sash—

he sat down for a moment at the doctor's old table.

His light-heartedness left him. He folded his arms on the table and laid his head upon them. He had done what was square. But it was hard. Oh, it was hard.

The picture of Rose as he had last seen her, with the tiny white garment in her hands—the picture he would carry away with him—came before his eyes, and he raised his head slowly. There was a strange wistful smile upon his bronzed face.

The thoughts of little children came to him. His great arms curved hungrily on the table. Flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone. Was he never to know what that meant? The home, the wife, the children; the Trinity that makes the world. He hungered for them then, with the strong man's hunger, which the weakling never knows.

But he knew now that these were not for him. His was the lot of the roamer. For him the open trail beneath untrammelled stars, the life of abrupt change and excitement, the lone but thrilling way of the born adventurer.

Foot-loose and free. It had to be so. It could not be anything else. For he knew now that no ties could hold him when the go-gods called.

"Tom!" he called softly.

His old partner leaped up, wide awake. Gaston was standing by the bunk-side, the pack on his shoulders, rifle in hand, ready.

"Come on, Tom; there's your pack. The moon's up; we're going to travel."

Up on the crest of the ridge where they had stood when they first saw the town, they paused and looked back. The lights of the settlement gleamed like pin-pricks in the darkness. One light gleamed particu-

larly bright. Gaston looked at it a long time before turning his back. Then he threw up his head and laughed, his right arm pointing northward.

"The trail, Tom Pine, the trail!" he cried. "Hit the trail!"

THE END

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